

1John 3:1-7

See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

CHOSEN FOR GOD'S FAMILY

"We are God's children." This is the main point of our lesson from first John, and this is the one thing that I want you to know and remember. We are God's children. God loves us and has welcomed us into His holy family.

How did we get to be in God's family? The Bible tells us that it is a divine gift. God chooses us out of love. It is a work of pure grace.

In a recent biography Steve Jobs told of an incident that happened in his childhood. Steve told the little girl next door that he was adopted. And the little girl responded, "So does that mean your real parents didn't want you?"

Steve said, "Lightning bolts went off in my head. I remember running into the house crying, asking my parents. And they sat me down and they said, 'No, you don't understand. We specifically picked you out.'"

Jobs continued, "From then on, I realized that I was not just abandoned. I was chosen. I was special."

Jobs did think that he was chosen, but he also spent the rest of his life trying to prove his chosen status. He was a person of great accomplishment, but also a person with significant personal flaws.

This is true of many people. Personal accomplishment often comes at the expense of other things because we want to prove our worth.

But, this does not need to be true for those who have been called to be a part of the Christians family. Yes, God has chosen us, but God did not pick us out because we were the best and the brightest. God chose us out of love.

John wrote, "See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." (1 John 3:1)

God loves us without any strings attached. God makes us a part of the family from the very beginning. We do not have to prove anything to anyone. Our place in the family is secure.

Unfortunately, many people turn that good news into good advice. They say that we “can” be God’s children, but we need to prove that we are worthy. We need to prove our chosen status.

And when the church starts trying to prove her worth that’s when the church often stops being the church. Instead of being a family of faith based upon the loving choice of God we become harsh taskmasters.

We insist that others act and believe just like us. Instead of proclaiming a salvation based upon grace through faith we insist upon a salvation based upon works.

John reminds us that are called to be different from the world. (1 John 3:1b) And this difference will cause us trouble.

The world will not understand a community based on God’s unconditional grace and love. Just as Jesus was misunderstood and rejected by the world, so we will be misunderstood and rejected as well.

So, how are disciples of Jesus different from the world?

WALK BY FAITH

First, we approach the future with a sense of openness and faith. Today we live by one important truth. We are God’s children. God has chosen us out of love.

But, we also know that the future is truly not ours to see or control. Our lesson for today tells us that what “we will be is not yet revealed.”

In the Bible faith is described as the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) The Apostle Paul reminds us that we walk by faith and not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

Faith requires courage. Faith requires trusting the promises of God to be true. Faith is stepping out into the unknown because we know who holds the future.

Now, we have good reason for such faith. Such faith is not blind faith. It is faith built upon the promises of God.

For example, as the Apostle Paul put it, we know that since God is for us no one can be against us. (Romans 8:31)

We know that when we come to the end of our days the shadows of life will be illuminated by the glory of God's presence. Though we see through a glass darkly, then we will see face to face. (1 Corinthians 13:12)

And yet for now we must be content with the knowledge that right now we are God's children by the grace of God and at the end of our journey we will see Jesus, and we will be like him. (1 John 3:2)

This is a good description of heaven.

In heaven we will be united with God in Christ, and that will change everything forever. In an instant we will be transformed, transfigured by the power of God's love and grace as revealed in Jesus.

What more do we need to know? There is no need to speculate about the details of heaven. If the Creator, Redeemer and Spirit of hope are there, we know the details have been worked out.

This passage teaches that heaven has a purpose. People often talk about someone who is so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. I know some people like that!

But, this passage, like so many in the Bible, teaches us that the sure hope of heaven in the future enables us to do earthly good today.

If God has made us a part of His family through the power of his grace and love, then that love has a hold on us.

That love is a purifying force that changes how we live today. John wrote in verse 3, "And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."

WE'RE NO JESUS CHRIST

Verses 3-7 in today's lesson are very challenging. They are not challenging because they are hard to understand. They are challenging because they seem to require more of us than we can deliver.

For example, verse 3 challenges us to moral purity. But, then it goes on to suggest that we can purify ourselves just as he (that is Jesus) is pure. That sounds impossible.

I am reminded of a famous line delivered in a vice presidential debate. Some (mainly Democrats and comedians) said that Dan Quale wasn't qualified to be vice president.

And in his defense Quale suggested that his experience was similar to that of former President John Kennedy when he was elected to the Presidency the first time. That was in fact true. Both had served in Congress roughly the same amount of time.

Quale repeated this line on the campaign trail and repeated it in the debate. And the crafty old Bentsen was ready to pounce. Lloyd replied in his gravelly voice, “Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy, I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy.”

There was thunderous applause, and the “You’re no Jack Kennedy” line became a shorthand way of putting down your political opponent.

How good we look depends upon to whom we are compared. You and I might look good compared to some people. But, none of us look very good or pure when compared with Jesus Christ.

If we are to be compared to Jesus then I can imagine the judgment pronounced upon us, “I knew Jesus. Jesus was a friend of mine. Brother, you’re no Jesus Christ.”

And of course that judgment is true. If someone claims to be Jesus we suggest that they are mentally ill. We are not pure as he was pure. We are not sinless as he was sinless. We are not righteous as he was righteous.

And yet, this passage seems to suggest that the impossible is possible.

Verse three says that we need to purify ourselves so that we are as pure as Jesus. Verse 6 says we are to be sinless just as he was sinless. And then verse 7 states that we are to be righteous just as he is righteous.

How do we interpret this passage? It seems to me that the bar is too high for even the best of us.

I know Jesus Christ. And Brothers and sisters, we’re no Jesus Christ.

FAITH AND WORKS

One of the important rules of biblical interpretation is this: Scripture interprets Scripture.

In other words we believe that the Bible is God’s Word. The whole Bible is God’s Word. And when we have difficulty interpreting a particular passage we look at the whole canon of Scripture.

So, what do we find when we look at the whole Bible? Today we read that those who “abide in him” do not sin.

And yet there are many passages that suggest just the opposite. For example, Paul in his letter to the Romans said that all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory.

In fact, John contradicts this claim to perfection in this same letter. John said that if claim to have no sin we are “liars and the truth is not in us.” (See 1 John 1:8-2:2) That’s pretty strong language.

So how are we to understand our lesson for today and its claim to perfection?

Maybe we should just stop at verse 2 with the comforting notion that we are God’s children? Oops, too late for that!

Let me say up front that no explanation I give will be totally satisfactory. This passage presents a real contradiction that is not easily solved.

But, this is an important passage because this tension, this contradiction has been a point of struggle in the church from the very beginning. And it remains a very important struggle in the church.

The Bible clearly teaches that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

This wonderful truth is the cornerstone of the Reformation.

CHEAP GRACE

But, the early church had a problem with grace.

If we are saved by grace alone, does this mean that we can forget about works? Apparently there were some who taught this.

Paul in his letter to the Romans talked about those who took this approach. They said that we should continue to sin so that grace could abound. To put it another way, “God will forgive us. He’s in the forgiving business.” (Romans 6:1)

Paul didn’t like that interpretation one little bit. Using strong language Paul said in effect that God did not save us from our sins so that we settle comfortably back into them.

Bonhoeffer famously referred to this as “cheap grace.”

Real grace, real forgiveness calls us to live in a new way. Real grace, costly grace invites us to live in a future where we are pure even as Jesus was pure. Real grace, costly grace invites us to live in a future where we are righteous even as Jesus was righteous.

Yes, we are not perfect. As our passage for today puts it, what we will be is not yet been revealed. And as John put it earlier in his letter, if we claim to be without sin we are liars. But, what we know is this. The final goal is to be like Christ. The final goal is to be pure and righteous.

And that heavenly goal calls us forward. That heavenly goal will not allow us to settle down comfortably in our sin. That heavenly goal will not allow us to live in a lawless and thoughtless way today.

To coin a phrase using our political example, God tells us, “You are no Jesus Christ, but I am calling you to be like Jesus. And one day you will be like Jesus.”

ROYAL RESPONSIBILITY

God does not allow us the self-delusion that we are sinless, but God also reminds us that sin cannot be casually accepted within the lives of God’s children.

We are God’s children, and that means we are to act accordingly.

England’s royal family fascinates many people. If you are a child of the king or queen you are born into a life of great privilege and luxury.

But, with that privilege also comes great responsibility. You represent England.

The press will magnify any mistakes you make, and those mistakes will ultimately harm your country’s image. If you are a child of the king, you have a responsibility to act a certain way.

Your life is not your own.

The same is true for those of us who are part of God’s family. We are God’s children. We are special. We are God’s chosen people.

And that fact has a claim on us.

We are ambassadors of God’s grace.

We are chosen to promote God’s justice and righteousness in the world. We are chosen to promote a way of life that is different from the ways of the world.

Who we are is determined by who we are becoming.

FUTURE PORTRAIT

In her autobiography Gertrude Stein described an exchange she had with Pablo Picasso. Even though he had painted a portrait of her, Picasso did not immediately recognize her.

Stein murmured to Picasso that she liked his portrait of Gertrude Stein.

Picasso replied,

“Yes, somebody said that she does not look like it, but that doesn’t make any difference, she will.”

This is how God works with us.

God has painted a portrait, an image of who we will be in the life of Jesus.

Today, we sometimes don’t look very much like that portrait. We do not behave like children of the heavenly king.

But, that’s okay.

One day we will be like him.

OUR TRUE SELF

Carol Simcox talks about the call of Christ in this way,

"You and I shall be our real, complete selves for the first time ever. We think of ourselves now as human beings.

We really aren't that - not yet. We are human becomings.

The fetus conceived only yesterday is a human becoming. If you are living in Christ, believing in him and trying to follow and obey him as the master of your life, you are by his grace, becoming ever more and more like him."

Don’t misunderstand. When we say God is in the process of making us like Jesus that does not mean God is cloning us into exact replicas of Jesus. No, the more we become like Jesus, the more we become our true selves.

Don Wardlaw put it this way, "... to be yoked to Christ is to be a soul companion with the authentic self God intends for us to be."

In other words, as we discover more and more what it means to be like Christ, we uncover more and more of our honest to God selves. We become more authentic the more we become like Christ.

And how can we become as human as Jesus, a humanity that truly reflects the Divine? It is not a do it yourself project. It is God’s work.

Transformation happens when God convinces us that we are his children.

Remember when Jesus was baptized and a voice from heaven said, “You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased”?

That heavenly vision provided the foundation for the life of Jesus.

And today's lesson is John's way of saying to us that the same vision should be the guiding force in our lives.

We are God's children. We are loved.

We are invited to enter into a relationship with God that goes above and beyond our fondest experiences of mother and father. God's love for us is tender and strong, reassuring and challenging, nurturing and empowering.

We are God's children. We are loved.

AMEN.