

First John: Authentic Faith for Jesus' People

#7: What It Means to Be Children of God, I

1 John 2:28-3:10

Take a first look.

I. Children tend to take their cues in life from their parents. Sometimes, they react strongly to what they perceive their parents are or have been. Take this story for example:

The Rai TV network had aired an episode (several years ago) of their Sicilian mob drama *Il Cacciatore (The Hunter)*, in which a character depicted his past as a *mafioso*. As part of a deal Filippo made with police to become an informant, Pasquale had previously admitted to four different murders, and had previously served 10 years behind bars. Since becoming a police informant, Pasquale had since entered the witness protection program, and had built a family with a different identity.

Understandably, all of that was news to his 14-year-old daughter, who hadn't been around during that tumultuous time. According to his interview with local news service La Repubblica, Pasquale's daughter shouted at him, "Dad, what have you done?!" She has since retreated to her room, leaving only to go to school.

Subsequently, Pasquale sued the network, claiming defamation. He is seeking a million euros (about \$1.1 million) in damages.¹

II. I really think that all of us dads are a disappointment at some level to our children, even though, thank God, most of us have *not* been mafia hit men. Why do I have such a pessimistic outlook? Because all of us dads (and everyone else) are fallen human beings that can't sustain a practice of real virtue perpetually day after day for a lifetime. We all have something, hidden in our past or lurking in our present, that is still in need of redemption. So, the right thing for us to do is to press forward, to draw closer to God, to seek the fullness of the Holy Spirit to become all that Jesus intends for us to be. That makes for a great example: "walk humbly with your God!" (cf. Micah 6:8).

III. But there is a Father that none of us can quite be and that all of us can aspire to imitate. We are taught by our Lord Jesus to pray, "*Our Father* who is in the heavens ..." (cf. Matthew 6:9, NJV). Note the personal nature of this relationship implied as we pray: "*Our Father*." And note also the shared nature of His fatherhood: "*Our Father*." In the passage before us, and for a couple of messages, let's explore together what it means to be *children of God*.

Take a closer look at 1 John 2:28-3:10.

I. God's children remain in Him, doing what is right (2:28-29).

1. *This prepares us for Jesus' coming* (see Matthew 24:36-50). We are to "remain in Him," presumably in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and at the same time in the Father (see 1 John 2:23). The purpose for such an established relationship is that we will be confident and not ashamed when Jesus returns to earth at the end of the age.

Consider Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24:36-50. In this passage, often referred to as The Olivet Discourse because Jesus is teaching at The Mount of Olives, Jesus talks about the end of things as we know them. Jesus says, "no one knows" the day or hour at which He will return except

¹ Jelani Greenidge, pastor, Portland, Oregon; source: Saphora Smith, "Ex-Mafia hitman sues after TV show reveals his past to daughter," NBC News (10-04-18), submitted to PreachingToday.com.

the Father. He likens that future time to the time of Noah. Everyone was carrying on with life, as usual, until Noah entered the ark and God closed the door. The End came suddenly, unexpectedly, and inescapably on the world. It will be like this at The Very End. Jesus' conclusion: "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matthew 24:44, ESV). He goes on to pronounce a blessing on the faithful servant who does his master's bidding while he is away, and He pronounces a curse on the "wicked servant" who mistreats his fellow-servants "and eats and drinks with drunkards." The end for that person? "There will weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 24:51b, ESV).

A—When we do what is right, we build up confidence for Jesus' return, knowing that He will interrupt something when He arrives suddenly and unexpectedly and inescapably. What will He interrupt us doing?

2. This follows the example of Jesus. As he says, "You know that everyone who keeps on doing what is right has been begotten from Him" (v. 29b, NJV). The image of the parent is seen in the child, here as far as behavior is concerned. Here is where learning to pray "Our Father who is in the heavens" can transform our lives.

A—We have a heavenly Father that loves us with an eternal love and purpose. This should motivate us to be like Him.

I— "Sofia Cavaletti is a researcher who has pioneered the study of spirituality in young children. She finds that children often have an amazing perception that far surpasses what they've already been taught. One three-year-old girl, raised in an atheistic family with no church contact at all, no Bible in the home, asked her father, 'Where did the world come from?' He answered her in strictly naturalistic, scientific terms. Then he added, 'There are some people who say that all this comes from a very powerful being, and they call him God.' At this, the little girl started dancing around the room with joy as she said, 'I knew what you told me wasn't true—it's him, it's him!'"

Similarly, astrophysicist, author, and defender of the faith Sarah Salviander was raised by her parents to be a devout atheist. Her parents moved the family from Oregon to British Columbia, Canada, when she was young, because they were atheistic socialists and thought that would be more supportive for their worldview. Sarah was entranced by space and mathematics, and so returned to Oregon, to Eastern Oregon University to study physics. She had lived twenty-five years with the absence of God and a critical bias against Christianity. But at the university, she met real Christians, not only as fellow students but as professors. Two of her physics professors were serious Christians who saw no contradiction between science and faith. During graduate school, her biases against Christian faith were eroded even further as she studied astrophysics. There were so many factors involved in the balance of the universe and our ability on earth to study such things. At this point, she discovered the work of Gerald Schroeder, notably his book *The Science of God*. It revolutionized her thinking and gave her confidence that the book of Genesis, and by extension the rest of the Bible, is truly the word of the God who created the world and this set her up to also discover that this same God sent His Son Jesus Christ to save humanity from sin and death.

All this motivated Sarah to seek not only to learn more about the cosmos but also to serve God by helping others see the connection between science and faith. The Creator of "the heavens and the earth" wishes to know us a Father to His beloved children.

II. God's children affirm their status in Him (3:1).

1. Our status as God's children affirms His love for us. "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called 'children of God,' and we are!" (1 John 3:1, NJV). There is a cosmic truth involved in our prayer, "Our Father in heaven" This isn't just a name, argues John, it is reality: "and we are!"

2. *Our status as God's children estranges us from those who don't know God.* This is the flip side of that truth. Those who are not God's children will not recognize the family resemblance, or they will hold it in disdain.

A—We should remind ourselves every day that we belong to God's very family because of our faith in Jesus Christ His Son.

I—Who knows, but that as we live fully as His children, even those who haven't trusted Him may yet do so.

"The publicist for the late author and debater Christopher Hitchens asked Christian author Larry Taunton to arrange a series of debates between Hitchens, an outspoken atheist, and Christian thinkers. Over the ensuing years, Hitchens and Taunton developed an unlikely friendship. Hitchens stayed in Taunton's home, and prior to Hitchens' death from cancer, the two friends took two long road trips across America. Here's how Taunton describes what happened on one of those trips:

My mind goes back to the Shenandoah. The skies are clear, the autumn leaves are translucent in the early afternoon sun, and the road ahead of us is open ... In a strong, clear voice, Christopher is reading from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John. Reaching the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth verses, his face lights up with recognition.

He stops. "I know this one too," he says. "I did not recall its connection with the resurrection of Lazarus."

"It's a great verse," I add, sensing we have reached a defining moment. "Yes, Dickens thought so," Christopher says, and then, taking his reading glasses off, he turns to me and asks: "Do you believest thou this, Larry Taunton?" His sarcasm is evident, but it lacks its customary force.

"I do. But you already knew that I did. The question is, do you believest thou this, Christopher Hitchens?" As if searching for a clever riposte, he hesitates and speaks with unexpected transparency: "I'll admit that it is not without appeal to a dying man."²

III. God's children live by their hope (3:2-3).

1. *Our hope is shaped by the nature of our relationship with our Lord.* "We are children" now, John says, "and it has not yet been revealed what we will be." But the argument is clear enough, right? If we are children now, it must be something even better than that!

Almost the best the New Testament writers can do is to tell us what will not be true in our experience in glory. Take **Revelation 21:1-4 (NET)**, for instance:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had ceased to exist, and the sea existed no more. ² And I saw the holy city—the new Jerusalem—descending out of heaven from God, made ready like a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "Look! The residence of God is among human beings. He will live among them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist any more—or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the former things have ceased to exist."

Now this vision is a *promise* that produces an *expectation* that fulfills a strong *desire*. That is Christian hope!

2. *Our hope is shaped by the character of our Lord.* "Everyone who has this hope upon Him purifies himself, just as That One is pure" (1 John 3:3, NJV). Our hope is to stand fully accepted by our Holy Father; that motivates us to become holy in advance of that moment.

² Larry Alex Taunton, *The Faith of Christopher Hitchens: The Restless Soul of the World's Most Notorious Atheist* (Nelson Books 2016), pages 168-169, yes, from PreachingToday.com.

A—So let's live with this confident expectation for the future. Christian hope is *a desire mixed with an expectation based on the promise of God in Christ*. That is a pretty sure thing, don't you think?

I—Here is the formula for Christian Hope:

Christian Hope = Desire + Expectation
Promise of God

Take this slice of a meditation by Jill Carattini, in December of 2016³:

Christians have joyful, stirring songs that celebrate the wonder of our relation with God. This is especially true during the Christmas season with songs such as the spine-tingling Handel's *Messiah*. In contrast to this, in 2011 comedian Steve Martin performed a song on The Late Show with David Letterman that he called "the entire atheist hymnal" (on one page of paper). He called it: "Atheists Don't Have No Songs."

Play the first verse and chorus here (text below).

[Go here for the complete tune: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KMQ_7OFtiY]

Christians have their hymns and pages,
Hava Nagila's for the Jews,
Baptists have the Rock of Ages,
Atheists just sing the blues.

Romantics play Claire de Lune,
Born agains sing "He is risen,"
But no one ever wrote a tune,
For godless existentialism.

For Atheists there's no good news.
They'll never sing a song of faith.
In their songs they have one rule:
The "he" is always lowercase.

She continues:

Of course, his humor is meant to entertain us—and does. But what a contrast to a piece of music that moves *hearts and masses* across the board. Handel's *Messiah* is arguably one of the most mellifluous expressions of Christian doctrine ever produced. [You go, Jill, "mellifluous"!]

In fact, I think it makes all the sense in the world that both inexplicable tears and profound joy accompany the words and sounds of Handel's *Messiah*. For this *Messiah* brings with him an invitation unlike any other: Come and see the Father, the Creator, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Come and see the Light, and the Overcomer of darkness, the One who wept at the grave of a friend, and the one who collects our tears in his bottle even before he will dry every eye. Christians, let's sing our songs!

Yes, let's! When we have put our hope in Christ we have every reason to sing! "And He shall reign forever and ever! Hallelujah!" But there is a challenge for the here and now, too, right?

IV. God's children maintain godly habits of life (3:4-6).

³ Jill Carattini, in "Random Hallelujahs," RZIM: A Slice of Infinity (12-16-16), in PreachingToday.com.

1. *Sin is lawlessness. To practice one is to practice the other.* We sometimes make a distinction between *sin*, a theological and moral term, and *crime*, a judicial term. But when we understand the theology correctly, we understand that *sin is breaking the law of God*, Who is the Judge of all the earth.

2. *Jesus came to take away sins.* He didn't come just to pat us on the head and say, "Well, you're only human and you can't help it." Rather, He has come to grab us by the heart and say, "I will change you from the inside out so that you can't help doing what is right!"

3. *Jesus' people don't make a habit of sin.* This is what he means when He says, "Everyone who remains in Him does not make a habit of sin." The verb for "sin" there is in the present tense, denoting an ongoing or habitual practice. Some translations bring this out well: NIV: "No one who lives in him keeps on sinning." ESV: "No one who abides in him keeps on sinning." These are right on. This doesn't say, "That person will never sin," but rather, "That person doesn't have a habitual, unrepentant habit of sinning."

A—This is the moral challenge of the gospel: when we believe in Jesus Christ, God sends His Spirit into our lives to empower us to live differently, to live with eternity in view, to *practice righteousness*.

I—The late Pastor Tim Keller got the power of hope to sustain and motivate us. He writes:

Imagine you have two women of the same age, the same socioeconomic status, the same educational level, and even the same temperament. You hire both of them and say to each, "You are part of an assembly line, and I want you to put part A into slot B and then hand what you have assembled to someone else. I want you to do that over and over for eight hours a day." You put them in identical rooms with identical lighting, temperature, and ventilation. You give them the very same number of breaks in a day. It is very boring work. Their conditions are the same in every way—except for one difference. You tell the first woman that at the end of the year you will pay her thirty thousand dollars, and you tell the second woman that at the end of the year you will pay her thirty million.

After a couple of weeks the first woman will be saying, "Isn't this tedious? Isn't it driving you insane? Aren't you thinking about quitting?" And the second woman will say, "No. This is perfectly acceptable. In fact, I whistle while I work." What is going on? You have two human beings who are experiencing identical circumstances in radically different ways. What makes the difference? It is their expectation of the future. This illustration is not intended to say that all we need is a good income. It does, however, show that what we believe about our future completely controls how we are experiencing our present. We are irreducibly hope-based creatures.⁴

V. God's children resist the influence of the devil (3:7-10).

1. *Resistance to misleading teaching about morality (7).* The devil will try to get us to underplay the moral nature of our actions. He began with the first family, "Did God really say ..." is his favorite question (see Genesis 3:1).

2. *Alertness to the devil's influence and character (8).* Jesus came to destroy the works of the destroyer of humanity. The devil seeks to destroy us by tempting us away from God's truth and life. Jesus came to call us back into both God's truth and life. He came "full of grace and truth," John writes in the Gospel of John 1:14.

⁴ Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God* (Viking, 2016), page 153, drawn from PreachingToday.com.

3. *Practice of moral living (9)*. This is clear evidence of the work of God in human life. The “seed” of God’s presence and truth and moral power changes our habits toward life: away from sin and toward doing what is right. He says we can no longer just “keep on sinning” as though nothing has happened to us. The conscience is brought back to life, and we are newly motivated and empowered by God to live rightly.

Here is that interesting balance as the Apostle Paul describes it (Philippians 2:12-13, FJV):¹² *Therefore, my beloved, just as you^p have always obeyed, not as in my presence only but now much more in my absence, keep on working out your^p own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for God is the One who keeps working in you^p both to keep on desiring and to keep on working on behalf of the good pleasure.* He gives us both the desire and the ability to put forth the effort to seek “his good pleasure.” What is His “good pleasure”? See item 4:

4. *Living in righteousness and love (10)*. The moral test and the social test are reiterated here, although they are given in mirror image. He says, “*Everyone who does not keep practicing righteousness is not from God and everyone who does not keep on loving his brother*” (v. 10b, NJV). Right living and right loving are conjoined twins in the Christian life. You are not living right if you are not loving the other members of God’s family. You are not really loving others if you don’t respect God or them enough to live right.

A—So whose children are we today? Without mincing words, as usual, John gives two alternatives: “children of God and ... children of the devil.”

I—How do we know the difference? We can see it in our attitudes and actions and in the influences we have on others. In the movie **42**, which tells the story of Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play major league baseball, there is a tragic moment at one of the games. The Brooklyn Dodgers were playing, I think, in Philadelphia, and the fans were very hostile toward Robinson. In one scene, the camera focuses in closely on a man and a young boy (we assume his son) in the stands opposing the Dodgers. The man begins to throw racial slurs at Robinson, and at first the boy is shocked as he looks up at his dad. But as the dad continues to hurl insults and racial epithets at Robinson, the boy’s face slowly hardens. Pretty soon, he is joining in the name-calling. I realize that 42 is a movie, but the script-writer and director captured something very important with that scene. At first, the boy was shocked at the racially loaded insults his father was spewing at Robinson. As he continued to watch, he eventually took up his father’s attitude and actions. “Like father, like son,” as we say.

So, John would confront us like this today: whose character is more seen in our actions? The character of God in right living and true love for others? Or, the character of the devil—the slanderer, the accuser of the brethren, the liar?

Take it home (final applications).

I. This is what it means to be children of God: we seek to do what is right and we keep on loving other brothers and sisters in Christ, with a love that spills over to everyone else, too.

II. Let’s continue to seek His fullness in our lives. This is why He came.