

# **“He became what we are to make us what he is” (Irenaeus)**

John 3:1-8

Sermon 2/6 in a Series on 1 John

Even though my father died when I was ten his presence is still physically evident today. It is evident in me. I have some of the features that were distinctive in Douglas Gibson. Balding head, big bones, a prominent nose, a broad forehead and Gibson ears. Yes I reflect my father's physical likeness because I received from him a genetic inheritance.

What I received from my father genetically, St. John, in this morning's epistle passage, states we have received spiritually from God. As believers in Jesus Christ we have a spiritual inheritance. In this passage from chapter three we are told that those who belong to God bear God's likeness because we are his children. Because we are his children St. John wants us to: i) remember who we are; ii) remember what we can become so that iii) our lives show that we both know who we are and who we can become.

Irenaeus, who was an early disciple of Jesus summarized beautifully the message of John's letter when he wrote: “Jesus became what we are to make us what he is.” John wants us to recognize that the more we understand why Jesus became one of us, the more fully we will understand what it means to become like him. So he says first of all:

Remember who you are: St. John reminds us who we are when at verse one he writes: “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.” Notice what John says here, “that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” There is a point of emphasis given to this description. He wants us to recognize that in this life regardless of how we might feel, regardless of how we see ourselves on any given day, we are children of God.

Let's think about what it means to be a child of God. By nature we are God's creatures, but it is by grace that we become the children of God. There are two English words that are closely connected but whose meanings are widely different. Paternity and fatherhood. Paternity describes a relationship in which a man is responsible for the physical existence of a child. Fatherhood on the other hand describes an intimate

loving relationship that is nurtured over many years allowing father and child to grow together as they live with each other day by day.

In the sense of paternity, we are all creatures of God, but in the sense of fatherhood, we are children of God when we are aware of his gracious approach to us as we respond to his love.

Let us suppose that you are a fifteen-year-old without parents. There is an adult who has always loved you and cared for you. He wants to adopt you. But according to the courts that adoption requires your consent. In a similar sense God has always loved us and cared for us. Once we claim Jesus Christ by faith, our adoption as a son or daughter is official. Then what a wonderful status we have. What could be a higher honour than to be a child of the king of Kings!

But at times we don't feel like his children. At times we feel that our heavenly Father doesn't care for us. This is due in part to where we are living. St. John says we live in the world that doesn't see us for who we are. In chapter 5:19 John says that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one. This means that there are those who might actively oppose us as we live for Christ. It might mean there are those circumstances that overwhelm us and we feel defeated and deflated. It might mean that the events we read about and see portrayed on television perplex us and leave us confused. But when we recognize that the world is under the power of the evil one it will help us to realize that the Devil wants to undermine us. He wants us to question who we really are and leave us believing God is not our Father but just our creator who now leaves us on our own. The evil one wants us to conclude that God just does not care. This is part of the way the Devil exercises his power over people. He instills doubt into our minds and hearts so that we live in the world as people who believe we have no one to rely on but ourselves.

Not so says John, We really are children of God right here and right now. But because we live in a world that neither knows God nor sees us for who we truly are we can doubt and struggle with our true identity. This leads John to have us recognize that as Christians we are not only to live remembering who we are but by also remembering who we will become. At verse 2 John writes: "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." John looks to the future saying that we cannot fully grasp who we will one day become. Words fail him. But

he wants us to know that because this life is only the beginning and because we live in the world that is still under the power of the evil one, we have not yet fully experienced what it means to be children of God. One day we will. To this day John points when he says “but what we do know is that at that time we will be like Jesus because we will see him as he truly is.”

May we sit in adoration and awe-filled praise before this wonderful truth. We will one day bear fully the image of God. One day we shall be like Jesus, changed into his likeness. Knowing who we will become helps us to remember who we are which in turn motivates us to live a certain way in our present day lives. Look at verses 3 “And all who have this hope in him (that is Jesus) purify themselves, just as he is pure.” John wants us to realize that if we believe what he has said in verses one and two it will effect the way we live. Those who know that God stands at the end of the road will make all of life a preparation to meet him. We will want to purify ourselves just as he is pure.

The rest of the letter builds on verse three. John will show us what it means to live a life of purity in all that follows.

Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century scientist and theologian wrote: “There are two kind of people: the righteous who believe themselves sinners and the rest who believe themselves righteous.”

St. John was writing to a group of people who were being influenced by some people who disregarded our need to consider how sin mars our life. They thought they were righteous and could live any old way. John therefore sets out for those influenced by this teaching the truth that because they are children of God they are righteous now and will one day be fully righteous. Because of this great truth he wants them to know how to deal with sin in their lives now. To this end he sets out in verses 4-9 an analysis of sin so that it can be seen for what it is and avoided.

He tells us what sin is. It is the deliberate breaking of the law of which people are well aware. At verse four he writes “Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.” Sin is to obey oneself rather than to obey God.

He tells us what sin does. It undoes the work of Christ. Christ is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is why he writes at verse five “You know that

he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.” To sin is to bring back what Jesus came to abolish.

He then tells us why sin is. It comes from the failure to abide in Christ. At verse 6 are these words “No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.” What St. John is saying here is that as we abide in Christ we will not continue to willingly sin. We have to remember that in chapter one he said that the person who says he has not sinned is a liar. Therefore John acknowledges that we will sin. But he is also aware that as we remember the continual presence of Jesus in our lives we will grow in bearing his likeness as we bear fruit for him. At the same time those things that are sinful will be cut away so that we are like healthy trees that have had the dead wood removed.

He goes on to tell us where sin comes from. It is from the devil. To live in a state of habitual sin is in John's words to be a child of the devil. Look at verse “Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.” “The devil”, writes William Barclay, “is the one who sins, as it were on principle. That is probably the meaning of the phrase “from the beginning”. We sin for the pleasure that we think it will bring us; the devil sins as a matter of principle. The New Testament does not try to explain the devil and his origin; but it is quite convinced - and it is a fact of universal experience - that in the world there is a power hostile to God, and to sin is to obey that power instead of God.”

Finally St. John tells us how sin is conquered “It is conquered because Jesus destroyed the works of the devil. He has broken the power of evil and by his help that same victory can be ours. So at verse eight he writes: “The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.”

St. John has given us a way to understand sin in these verses. As we know how to cope with sin we are well on our way to growing in purity. We are motivated to live lives of purity because we know that God stands at the end of the road. We therefore want to purify ourselves just as he is pure because as St. John says we are “children of God” who will one day become “like Jesus.”

