

Sermon File # 1046

Scripture Text: 1 John 2:28-3:3

Sermon Title: *God's Forever Children: Motivated to Be Like Jesus*

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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God's Forever Children: Motivated to Be Like Jesus

Introduction:

Today we continue our look into John's first letter to the churches, as he gives us various tests by which we can examine the authenticity of our salvation faith. As a concerned, loving pastor, John wants all in the churches to take a close look at our relationship with Christ and be certain we have received the free gift of eternal life.

In previous messages from the first two chapters, we have been given John's moral test (Is our behavior reflective of a relationship with Christ?), his love test (Are our lives characterized by Christ-like love?), and last Sunday we took his doctrinal test (Are we placing our faith in the divine Son of God and what his sacrifice for our sins?). With today's text, John begins a second application of these same tests by an elaboration of the moral test. An important proof of being a Christian is righteousness that comes from an abiding, mystical, relationship with Christ that contains also a hope in his future appearing (Stott, 116). John writes about God's forever children who are, because of this hope, motivated to be like Jesus.

Follow as I read **1 John 2:28-3:3**.

Last week we heard John's warning that many antichrists are around us and the final antichrist ('instead of' or 'against Christ') is coming (2:18). Today we hear his reassuring but also sobering words that *the* Christ is coming (Yarbrough, 169), just as he promised, and tells us the difference this expected appearing should make in our present living.

The second coming of Christ is a major theme in Scripture, appearing 318 times in the 260 chapters of the New Testament. And always Christ's return is a "practical doctrine" (Boice, *EJ*, 97) and incentive for godly, faithful living, and never as a matter for satisfying curiosity or providing material for prophecy preachers who give sermons and write books about their speculations and imaginings.

As I noted last week, the church has been in the last days since the risen Christ ascended to heaven and poured out the Spirit on the church at Pentecost to equip us for living the Great Commandment (Mark 12:28-34) and doing the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). And each generation is to live in readiness for Christ's return, which is certainly closer than it's ever been! But our readiness doesn't come from trying to speculate and satisfy our curiosity, but in living with hope that motivates us to purity of life and perseverance in service.

In our text John reminds us that as children of God we have a great motivation by our hope in Christ's return. As his forever children we are motivated to be like Jesus, which is our highest calling. First, we are...

Motivated by duty

John uses that tender address, "dear children," reminding them that in a way they are his spiritual children, but more importantly are the beloved children of God. As God's children they have a duty to the heavenly Father. Sometimes we think of duty as an onerous, burdensome task, like doing excessive homework for an overly demanding, unreasonable school teacher or extra work from an employer who requires all our free time. But the first definition of duty is "conduct due to parents and superiors: RESPECT" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*).

We have a loving heavenly Father, whom we love and respect, and are motivated by the duty to be...

Abiding and confident

Last week we noted how we are to abide in Christ in a faithful love relationship, characterized by staying in the Word and seeking intimate fellowship with Christ, and being filled with the Holy Spirit. This kind of abiding in Christ's love enables us to detect and detest false teaching and remain true to Christ and his message of truth (2:24-27).

Now John says that we must abide in Christ in order to be able to stand before him with confidence when he returns. One scholar calls this a “balanced eschatology,” which calls us to remain in Christ *now* so we can stand before him *then* (Smalley, 130). This word “confidence” (*parresia*) we are to have in the presence of the returning Christ is also “fearlessness and joyousness” (Yarbrough, 169). It also has the connotation of “assurance, openness, the absence of inhibiting fear that betokens true friendship, mutual confidence and courageous liberty.” It’s like a child’s “unhesitating confidence in ‘saying it all out’ to a parent” (White, 73f).

What a great thought, that as we abide with Christ in an intimate love relationship of trust, dependence and obedience, turning our life into a prayer, we can stand before him as a much-loved, uninhibited child, excitedly greeting a returning parent!

Most of us can probably remember *at least one experience* in childhood or in our teen years when we did our duty to our parents and were unashamed (2:28) when they returned home to examine our work. We were confident they would be pleased because we didn’t disappoint them and we were confident of their appreciation as loving parents.

John expands this thought as he says we are motivated by our duty to be...

Righteous and reassured

The confidence of the abiding, obedient child is contrasted with the embarrassment and shame of the disobedient. Since he has been writing about false teachers who are antichrists, John implies they will be the ones ashamed before Christ when he appears. Some interpreters see this as the momentary embarrassment of the true believer who is in a backslidden condition when Christ returns, and will face a rebuke before being finally admitted into the glorious Kingdom. As one Bible teacher wrote, like a dirty little boy, “accepted but not acceptable” (Wiersbe, 99). And I’ll admit, that’s the way I saw it formerly.

But I think the witness of Scripture and our text says that all true believers in Christ, who are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, will greet Christ with unashamed confidence and joyful assurance because we are all justified freely and fully through faith in Christ (Romans 5:1f). Of course, we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an accounting before him and receive rewards based upon the faithful stewardship of our lives (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 25:14-30). But all of God’s redeemed children, made righteous through the blood of Christ, will be greeted by the loving, waiting Father, portrayed by Jesus in the parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15: 11-32).

Our duty, however, is to live a righteous life (not self-righteous!) that is evidence of a genuine rebirth. “If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him” (2:29). The *New Living Translation* says, “Since we know that Christ is righteous, we also know that all who do what is right are

God's children." As has been well said, John is writing that righteous conduct is not a condition for rebirth but a consequence of it (Barker, 330). Our duty then is to make certain we have received God's work of saving grace through our faith in Christ, and that this grace is demonstrating itself through our changed behavior resulting from the rebirth.

John is in 2:29 emphasizing our family relationship with Christ, which is demonstrated as we obey the duty of living a righteous, Christ-like life. Right conduct shows we are God's born-again children. Believers are not simply worldly people trying to live better, but are people who have been radically renewed, and "the habitual practice of righteousness is evidence of such divine activity" (Morris, 1264).

God's children have "the filial duty of obedience," and doing what is right, doing true Christ-like, Jesus-directed obedience, gives us confidence in the presence of Christ now and assures us we will be confident at his second appearing (Marshall, 168). God's forever children are motivated by the duty of abiding in a love relationship with Christ and living a life that reflects his true righteousness.

And God's forever children are...

Motivated by dignity

In a sense all humankind are the children of God by creation, since all are created in God's image and receive the benefits of his general grace (Isaiah 45:11f; Matthew 5:45). But those of us who believe in and have experienced the rebirth are God's children in a "further sense" (Yarbrough, 175), which John celebrates in 3:1, which is "an outburst of wonder" (Stott, 118).

This sense of the "wonder of it all" arrests John as he writes: "'Look!' he says, 'Look at the love the Father has given us. We are called children of God. And we are!'" (Morris, 1264). I'm afraid we have lost, or worse, have never contemplated this glorious truth and privilege, to be claimed and even loved by the heavenly Father as his children. And he loves us as only he can, with a lavish love (Smalley, 140) beyond our comprehension.

Although we live in what is in many ways a completely secular and post-Christian culture, our society in the West continues to enjoy the benefits of our Judeo-Christian heritage. One of these is the humanitarian responsibility of parents to care for their children. John addressed this letter to the church in the midst of a Greco-Roman culture that was often cruel and inhumane in the treatment of children, who were often abused and neglected. Fathers were free to dispose of unwanted babies, who were often "left to die in an out of the way place" (Yarbrough, 176).

What a precious thought this was to John's readers, and should be also to us, that we are God's beloved children, whom he has begotten and also adopted as objects of his love and delight. John sees this as...

A high calling

We need to see what Calvin calls "the dignity and excellence of our calling" as God's children (265). We are not only named as God's children, but have been chosen to be his children before the creation (Ephesians 1:4). God sent his Son to redeem us in order that he might adopt us with the full privileges of his children. And he gave us the Spirit who prompts us to call upon God as our "Abba Father," our dear heavenly Father (Galatians 4:4-7).

God's great love for us is the reason we have been given the privilege of being his children. The price he paid for our being his children is the cross of Jesus, his beloved eternal Son (1 Peter 1:18f). The cross has made possible the restoration of the image of God marred by sin and also our reconciliation, our peace with God (Colossians 1:20).

To be called to an everlasting love relationship with God as his children is a high calling, but also is...

A great challenge

To be called to be God's children is to accept the challenge of our identification with Christ, which John expresses also in this verse 3:1. We are God's children, "unknown" and often misunderstood in this dark, unbelieving and Christ-rejecting world. This sentence, "The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him" reflect the verses in John's introduction to his Gospel:

"He (the eternal Word and Son of God, Christ) was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:10f).

To be a child of God is to face the challenge of being misunderstood and rejected by the unconverted, lost world around us, whether in the home, classroom, workplace or communities where we live. It's the challenge of the cruciform life, of sharing in Christ's sufferings and taking the way of the cross, which is the way of self-denial, sacrificial service, and the witness of forgiving love for our enemies (Matthew 16:24ff; Colossians 1:24; Matthew 5:43-48).

I think of the persecuted church and the price they are paying to be known as the children of the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Certainly the hostile, unbelieving world doesn't recognize them for their value as God's children, and hates and persecutes them. Jesus says that we "do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words that I have spoken to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they

will persecute you also” (John 15:18ff). The very fact that they are persecuted is a sign that they have passed from death to life (Marshall, 171). Those who are persecuted because of righteousness have the blessing of unmistakable assurance that they are the children of God (Matthew 5:10). Regardless of how cruel and demeaning their persecution, those who suffer for Christ have a dignity that the world cannot take away or even diminish. And the hostile world doesn’t realize who they are “messing with”—the anointed of God (Psalm 105:15). And thus these persecutors will face a terrible judgment (Revelation 16:5ff).

The story is told that during slavery days in America, “some northern visitors in New Orleans were watching a company of slaves wearily shuffling along the dock, returning to their work. Spiritless, apparently indifferent to life itself, they were dragging themselves along. But one, in striking contrast, with head erect and with unbroken spirit, strode among them with the dignified bearing of a conqueror. ‘Who is that fellow?’ someone asked. ‘Is he the *straw boss*; or the owner of the slaves?’ ‘No,’ was the answer; ‘that fellow just can’t get it out of his head that he is the son of a king.’ And so he was. He had been dragged into slavery as a small child, but he had already been taught that he was no ordinary person; he was the son of a king, and must bear himself accordingly, as long as he lives. Now, after half a lifetime of hardship and abuse, which had broken the spirit of others, he was still the son of a king! Such,” says the writer, “is the inspiration and the strength of the (children) of God!” (Koller, 127).

God’s forever children are also...

Motivated by destiny

Verse 3:2 that promises that the believer is destined to be like Jesus when we see him in his unveiled glory is “probably the highest ‘shouting ground’ for believers” in the entire Bible (Koller, 128). Paul comes close to this lofty thought when he says that “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you will also appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:4).

The Apostle Paul also puts this hope in the context of God’s sovereign purpose for our lives when he says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Romans 8:28-30). God is at work in our lives, in all the twists and turns and even those that bewilder us, to prepare us for everlasting glory.

We are motivated to be more like Jesus as we anticipate this glorious destiny that is...

Mysterious but glorious

In our present condition, even as the redeemed children of God, we cannot look on the fullness of God's glory. Moses was denied seeing God's full glory. The Lord told him "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exodus 33:18-20). David evidently hoped for the sight of seeing God's face:

"And I—in righteousness I shall see your face; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with seeing your likeness" (Psalm 17:15).

What was denied to Moses and longed for by David will be granted to all the redeemed children of God when Jesus comes or when we go to be with him in the glory of his presence in Paradise. The reason we may behold him in all of his glory is that all sin will be removed from us and we will undergo the transformation of becoming perfectly like Jesus.

This doesn't mean we will be equal to Jesus. He alone is God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity. We will continue to worship him forever as the risen Lamb who was slain for us, in the glorious presence of God the Father and entirely filled with the Spirit (Revelation 5:12). But we will share his sinless nature, and will receive our glorified bodies, fitted for everlasting life in the New Heaven and Earth (Philippians 1:22; 3:20f). When we see Jesus we will also have complete understanding of all those mysteries and unknowns that baffled and troubled us during our earthly pilgrimage:

"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

As God's forever children we have now what is a mysterious but will certainly be a glorious destiny. This hope gives us a right perspective on present trials and struggles and also a strong incentive to become more like Jesus. We don't know what we *shall* be, but we know what we *should* be.

This hope of sharing the glory of Christ is the very heart of the New Testament teaching about everlasting rewards. As CS Lewis said, the Gospels are replete with "the unblushing promises of reward" of a "staggering nature," and we God's people should deeply desire those rewards. "We should not be troubled by unbelievers when they say that this promise of reward makes the Christian life a mercenary affair. There are different kinds of reward. There is the reward which has no connection with the things you do to earn it, and quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it" (Lewis, 2).

Our hope is not for some kind of materialistic compensation or reward in heaven, but our hope is to know Christ in all his fullness and to be like him in perfect holiness. Our hope is for the fulfillment of all that Christ has begun in us to make us like himself. When we become like Jesus we will discover the unspeakably glorious and delightful eternity he had in mind for us at the beginning. When we see Jesus and become like him that will be reward enough and will open to us an eternity of pleasures at his “right hand” (Psalm 16:11).

We are motivated by our destiny and thus...

Purified by hope

Although this verse 3 is written in the indicative, its force is “tantamount to an imperative” (Yarbrough, 179). In light of our hoped for destiny, we must pursue godliness (1 Timothy 6:11), seek to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus (2 Peter 3:18), and give ourselves “fully to the work of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58). As one has said, “John leaves no place for a dreamy heavenly mindedness that renders believers no earthly good” (Yarbrough, 179).

God’s forever children who are being purified by hope and long for his appearing (2 Timothy 4:8) are also the ones who make the most impact on this world, whether through being the quiet leaven of a godly character, being mighty in intercessory prayer, or taking a stand for social reform. Think of women like Teresa of Calcutta and men like William Wilberforce. “Lord Shaftesbury (1801-1885), the great English social reformer and a mature Christian, said near the end of his life, ‘I do not think that in the last forty years I have ever lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord’s return’ (Boice, *LFW*, 45).

This last verse (3:3) closes a circle with the first verse (2:28), reminding us that we seek to pass the moral, ethical test of becoming more like Jesus so we will not be ashamed when he comes (Comfort, 2143). We cannot afford to leave our standing with God in doubt. We must stand firm in his righteousness and maintain our hope as an anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:19).

And so we live in the awareness of our seeing Jesus and receiving his everlasting benediction, when we hope to hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!” (Matthew 25:21).

Jesus taught us to live in this readiness and watchfulness for his return, so that we will be found abiding in him when he appears in glory (Mark 13:33-37; Luke 12:35-48). As someone has said, the best way to prepare for the last things is to focus on the first things. We need to order our lives as though Jesus were already here. And indeed, as James says, “the Judge is standing at the door!” (5:9).

Being purified by hope might be likened to someone expecting a large financial gift which, as promised, is being sent in the mail. With “expectant assurance” that

beneficiary lays plans to spend the money. "Its arrival, after all, is just a matter of time" (Yarbrough, 180). Our hope is even more certain. We should begin living like God's forever children who will be free from all sin, will become like Jesus, and thus will be more than compensated for anything we give or spend for Jesus.

Conclusion:

As God's forever children we have all the motivation we need to live in readiness for his return. We have the family duty of abiding in Christ and sharing and reflecting his character. We have the dignity of being his children, with the hope of becoming exactly like Jesus in holiness and love. And our destiny is to share his glory and to feast at the table of the marriage supper of the Lamb in his Kingdom.

The Second Coming of Christ is a practical doctrine, and should make a difference in the way you and I live today. We don't know when Jesus will return to earth, but it's certain, that if he doesn't in your or my lifetime we will certainly go to meet him and stand before him.

My prayer is that none of us here in this worship room will be ashamed and unprepared when he returns, but that we will all be able to stand before him unashamed, because we have been made right with him through our repentance toward God and faith in Christ. Jesus died to remove our guilt and thus eliminate any need for shame before him. His blood and his righteousness cleanse us from every sin and give us a right standing before him.

What a great gift and unspeakable privilege, to be the children of God! And wonder of wonders, everyone in this room today can share that privilege and long for the appearing of Christ. This morning we will share the Lord's Supper, which is a foretaste of the marriage supper of the Lamb, which represents the everlasting celebration that awaits the children of God (Revelation 19:9).

Today you are invited by the loving heavenly Father to become one of his forever children.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Why do you think the New Testament has so many references (318) to the second coming of Christ?

2. What should be the thoughts and emotions of believers when we think about Christ's return?
3. What do you think is meant by the believer's being confident when Christ returns? (2:28) and what is the basis of that confidence?
4. Who do you think are the children of God? In what sense are all people considered to be God's children? How are believers in Christ God's children in a special sense (as John describes)?
5. Do you think Christians should expect everlasting rewards and what do you think will be the believer's greatest reward?
6. How should our hope influence our actions and Kingdom service?
7. As someone has said, "The best way to prepare for the last things is to focus on doing the first things." What would you say are these first things we should be doing?

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