

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 John 2:28-3:10

*"Children of God"*

One of the evocative metaphors for Christian life that John picks up from Jesus' teaching and uses repeatedly is that believers are "children of God." You will recall John's statement in the prolog to the Gospel that when Jesus came as "the Word made flesh... to those who received him he gave the right to become children of God." In Jesus' famous encounter with Nicodemus, recorded in John 3, Jesus used the image of being "born anew" or "born from above" or "born of the Spirit" to describe entering God's family; receiving the new life that he gives to those who accept and welcome him.

### 1) *Our Father*

In his letter, John is enthused with this picture of Christian life, and writes (literally) "See how great the love of God is, that we should be called - and truly are - children of God" (3:1). To John this is the great privilege that Christians have in knowing God as *Father*; something they learned from Jesus and which they now share with Jesus. Although there are several OT references to God as a "father" to Israel, it's clear that Jesus' constant use of the expression "my Father" not only spoke volumes about his self-understanding, but it also was taken up at Jesus' instruction by his disciples as the way *they* should think of God and speak to

God. "When you pray, say 'Our Father in heaven...'" said Jesus (Mt 6:9).

Addressing God as Father carries with it many deep implications for the Christian life. John teases some of them out as he continues to revisit the three themes of his letter: that Christian life includes *believing* in Jesus as the Word incarnate; it involves *repentance* from sin and being freed from sin's penalty and power by the atoning death of Jesus and his advocacy for believers at God's right hand, which leads to a life of moral purity; and thirdly that it reflects God's love for believers by involving them in practical and sacrificial *love* for other people.

His theme in this passage is freedom from sin and leading a moral life. His goal is to make Christians see that as children of God, purity is their calling and their character. To live purely is the necessary consequence of having God as your Father - and in this, Christians already share something vitally important with Jesus. Indeed their calling can aptly be described now as becoming like Jesus. John would have approved Charles Sheldon's slogan from 100 years ago that so many kids have embraced in the past decade: in any situation, ask yourself "*What Would Jesus Do?*"

But John goes further than this on the subject of becoming like Jesus. "Dear friends... we are now children of God, and what we will be is still not revealed... but when he appears, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (3:2). This is the extraordinary promise that one day, when we see Jesus Christ face to face, we will be changed, in a moment, into his likeness. It is the same promise that Paul refers to in his Corinthian letter: "Eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and it has not entered the mind of man, what God has prepared for those that love him" (1 Cor 2:9).

It is the promise of seeing Christ's glory, and being transformed by that (John 17), and it has very clear present consequences. Not only should believers be confident in God's love for them, but they should start now to purify their lives in preparation for their face-to-face meeting. It is, Jesus said, "the pure in heart" who will see God (Mt 5:8). And John tells believers how they can achieve this purity - be close to Jesus, "abide" in Jesus, "remain" in Jesus. Here is the basic principle of Christian moral formation: the nearer you get to Jesus, the more like him you become. One day, face to face, it will be complete. Meanwhile, live deeply and closely connected to Jesus and you will begin to reflect his character, which among other things is pure and free of sin.

## 2) *Christians Don't Sin*

This concept is clear, but there is a strand that runs through John's writing here that we find harder to grasp. In his usual "black and white, no shades of gray" style, John insists that there are only two possibilities: either you are a child of God and by nature do not sin, or you are a child of the devil and by nature always sin.

Now that not only offends our sensibilities, but leaves even devout Christians confused.

What is John talking about? He has already rebuked (in chapter 1) those who claim they do not sin and have not sinned, and told them that they are deceived and making God a liar. But now he asserts that Christians do not sin. Christians do what is right. That is how, he says, you can tell who is a child of God and a child of the devil, by observing whether or not they do right (3:7-10)!

Indeed, he claims that "no-one who lives in Christ sins" (3:6) and - even more pointedly - "no-one who is born of God can sin" (3:9). What does he mean? Over the centuries, Christians have struggled with these words, and interpreters have offered numerous suggestions. One view has it that John means "no Christian lives a life of *willful and deliberate* sin." This idea differentiates between deliberate and accidental sin, between voluntary and involuntary sin. It is in some ways appealing: the thought that while Christians will never be free from errors and slips - "we are all human, after all" - we can strive by God's grace and the internal work of the Holy Spirit to be free from deliberate, major sins.

The only thing wrong with this distinction between willful and involuntary sins is that it breaks down far too often. Truth is, we all sin more than we know, and even the "right things" we do are too often tainted by suspect motives. It's a lot harder to make this distinction than we think - and as I suggested a few weeks ago, it's going to get harder as our society finds more and more biological "explanations" for our behaviors! Which sins will still be "voluntary"?

Another way of looking at John's words here - which in the Greek are very terse (Christians don't sin, Christians can't sin...) is to note that these are present tense continuous verbs that grammatically can carry the sense "Christians don't keep on sinning... can't go on sinning." You may

have noticed that this is how the NIV translators, and many other modern NT translations, deal with these words. So this interpretation says it's not whether a sin is voluntary, but whether it's *persistent* that marks whether or not its doer is a Christian. Many people find this more credible and satisfactory – that occasional sins are one thing, but persistent sin is something else, and may mark a person out as being of suspect faith. They may *think* they believe, but it has never touched their behavior. Maybe “head knowledge” is not real faith?

Is that what John means? Perhaps. Or is there yet a third possibility, that he is (and we know this is often the case) using hyperbolic language, making a big contrast to get people's attention. Is he really telling them they had better watch how they live, because “Christians don't sin,” and anyone who *takes sin lightly* and dismisses its significance is putting themselves outside the family of God?

From this point of view, John is rhetorically claiming “*Christians don't sin!*” in the way we might say to our children “In our family, we don't gamble”... “we don't smoke”... or as they used to say “nice girls don't....” (whatever it was that nice girls didn't do). In other words, the message is “remember who you are, and act accordingly.” The implicit message behind the statement “Christians don't” is the imperative “Christians shouldn't.” I suspect this makes the best sense of the passage and of the way John writes.

### 3) *Don't Sin*

Which leaves us, of course, with the imperative. Christians should not sin – deliberately, persistently, or in any other way. Yes, it is sure: “If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus

Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (2:1-2).

But we should not sin. That is, inherently, not the Christian way of life. We have, if we have once turned to Christ, been forgiven of all our sins - past, present and future - and are not only delivered from the *guilt* of sin but are also enabled by the Spirit to be delivered from the *power* of sin in our lives. We have been “freed from sin” as a state of guilt and as an enslaving power.

But we have now to use that freedom to willfully think and do what is right. If we don't know just what that is, we should draw closer to Jesus and learn from him. We are to pray for release from the hidden sins that still drag on our lives and our consciences. We are to get more and more honest with ourselves about who we are and what we do. If we are Christians, we cannot hide behind the excuses of “that's just the way I am,” or “it's not my fault, it's those other people who made me do it, who treated me in a way that left me no choice, who stacked the deck against me...” If we are Christians, we can't forever be blaming other people for making us unhappy, or making us failures, or making us sinful, or whatever... we have to take responsibility for ourselves, our beliefs, our behavior, our actions.

If we are Christians, we have to be guided by that inner spiritual “ought” that says “Christians don't respond like that... Christians do it this way.” We won't get it right all the time, but we will be heading in the right direction. We will be following where Jesus is leading us. Somewhere within us will be a desire to be better people; we will harbor a “holy dissatisfaction” with who we are. The post-modernist's question “If you live another 30 years, what sort of person will you become?” will speak to us, and we will want to know that Christianity

has the power to transform the future, and to change people for the better.

Christians don't sin. That's the bald statement we have to learn. When we do sin, we can find forgiveness if we will turn to Christ in repentance. But we cannot be offhand about sin, any more than we can afford to be naive about evil in our world. And we certainly cannot use "religious faith" as a cloak for sin, as though anyone who claims to be a believer in Christ then has a license to act in any way they choose. There have been far too many cases in which Christians have been revealed in serious sin, and people can only ask "What were they thinking?" And if we are deeply honest with ourselves, we know that there are times when we are not thinking so clearly either!

But John won't put up with that sort of "fuzziness," any more than Jesus did. And so their words zip and fizz and cut and burn us - "Christians don't sin" - "If your hand or your eye cause you to sin, cut it off, gouge it out - it's better to go into heaven maimed than be thrown able-bodied into hell" (Mt 5:29 - 30).

We are sensitive souls, and are easily offended at times by other people's language. But we should perhaps open our ears and listen more carefully to the words of Jesus, and of his disciple John.

Let us pray...