

The Most Important Thing About You

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Preacher: Rev. Kevin Antlitz

[0 : 00] Again, such a delight to have all of you with us. It's my pleasure to introduce our preacher this evening. Kevin Antlitz is his name. He and his wife Susan are visiting. They came to the latter half of our retreat out in Middleburg, and they spent the night last night out there getting to know some people in our parishes, and now they're here with us today, and we invited them to preach tonight.

And then we'll be spending some time together tomorrow and just getting to know them a little better and letting them get to know us and our church a little better. For those of you who don't know, they're here as candidates.

They're discerning. We're prayerfully discerning who the Lord might call to serve as an associate pastor here at Church of the Advent, and so we're very excited to have them with us. And they hail from Princeton, if anybody is from there.

I know we have some Princeton folk here where they've been doing campus ministry for the last five years. And, Kevin, I'd love to invite you up to preach the word to us. Thanks. Good evening, everyone.

It's great to be here with you. I see some faces that I saw at the retreat. I'm very impressed that you all have a Sunday service after a retreat. It's very hardcore. I like that about you.

[1 : 14] It's awesome. Well, it really is a privilege for my wife Susan and I to be here with you. It was great to be at the retreat to get to meet so many of you that are here and loads of people who I'm sure couldn't make it out tonight because they're all tuckered out because we had quite a good time.

And it's really a great privilege for me to be up here to preach from God's word to you this evening. My sermon is called The Most Important Thing About You. And it's worth considering for a moment how you would answer the question, who am I?

Think about how you self-identify when meeting somebody new. I thought a lot about this last night as I've met a lot of people for the first time. What are the sorts of things you say when you meet someone for the first time?

What sorts of things are the most important for people to know about you? Or how about when you see yourself in the mirror? What do you notice? What do you see?

Or think about when you're left to the quietness of your own heart and your own mind. How do you imagine yourself? What do you think about yourself? What would you say is the most important thing about you?

[2 : 24] Well, A.W. Tozer, he was a theologian in the 20th century. He famously said this. You've probably heard it before. What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about you.

I'm sure that's been in probably one out of every ten sermons you've heard. It's a very famous passage, but I think it's wrong. And it's probably a hot take to say that he's wrong about it. But I'm going to appeal to C.S. Lewis to make my case for why I think he's wrong.

I don't think what we think about God is the most important thing about us. The most important thing about us is what God thinks about us. C.S. Lewis says this in his sermon, The Weight of Glory. He said, and I think he's referring to Tozer. He said, C.S. Lewis said this, I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing is how we think of God.

By God himself, it is not. How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of him is of no importance except insofar as it is related to how he thinks of us.

[3 : 28] And I think that's true. And so tonight I want to talk about the most important thing about you, which is what God thinks about you. So objectively, the most important thing about you is what God thinks of you. And subjectively, the most important thing about you is how you perceive God thinks about you.

And my goal is for this sermon is to bring the objective, what God really thinks about you, what I'm going to tell you in a minute, and how you perceive he thinks about you in alignment. So that's the plan.

And I'll let the cat out of the bag. This is what God thinks about you. If you know Jesus, if you love Jesus, if you trust Jesus, the most important thing about you is that you're a beloved son or daughter of God the Father.

This is your central identity. It's the most important, most profound, and most consequential thing about you. And this identity, this belovedness, should regulate and govern every single aspect of your life.

You're going out and you're coming in. And I realize that might not be new news to some of you. You've probably heard before that God loves you, that you're his beloved son or daughter. And as I was praying for the church and thinking about what I might say, and as the Lord brought this to mind to tell you that God loves you, that's what my sermon is essentially going to be about, I kept thinking about a scene from one of my favorite movies, Good Will Hunting.

[4 : 47] Some of you have probably seen it before. And this is sort of the iconic scene of the movie. Robin Williams, his name is Sean in the movie. He's talking to Matt Damon, who is Will, Will Hunting.

And Will had a very traumatic childhood. He was abused. Lots of really terrible things happened to him. And Sean is his counselor, his shrink.

And it's near the end of the movie, and you probably have seen it. Sean says to Will, Will, it's not your fault. And Will says, yeah, I know, I know, I know. And he says, no, it's not your fault.

And Will says, he looks at him, he's like, you just said this. I know it's not my fault. And then he says it again, it's not your fault. And then Will just sort of breaks down and cries. I'm not hoping or expecting you to break down and cry by virtue of this sermon.

But I do hope that even if you know cognitively that God loves you and that you're his beloved son and daughter, that through some of the things that we look at tonight in his scripture, that the Holy Spirit just impresses upon you that he really does love you and that it will change your life and how you live in it.

[5 : 53] So I'm going to reread our passage, 1 John 3, 1 through 3, and then I'll pray for us, and then we will dive in. Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.

On account of this, the world does not know us because it did not know him. Beloved, we are already God's children, although what we will be has not yet been fully revealed.

We know that when he is fully and finally revealed, we will be like him because we will see him as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him consistently purifies himself just as he is pure.

Let's pray. Our Father, we are reminded of the privilege it is to be able to call you Father. So I pray for these, my brothers and sisters here, that you would, by your Spirit, reveal to them just how much you love them.

I pray that you would do that. In Jesus' name, amen. So here's my plan for the evening. I'm going to look at this passage, 1 John 3, 1 through 3, in three moves.

[7 : 05] First, I'm going to unpack the biblical doctrine of adoption because this is what this passage is talking about. So I'm going to unpack adoption and why it's important. Secondly, I want to talk about what adoption means for us.

And third and finally, I want to talk about what adoption requires of us. So first, unpacking the biblical doctrine of adoption. Why is this important? Well, J.I. Packer, in a really wonderful book called Knowing God, he has a whole chapter.

And so if this sermon sort of piques your interest, I think it's chapter 19 in Knowing God, go there.

It's amazing. He says this in this chapter, if you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child and having God as his father.

And I love this line. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption.

So I want to help us grasp that a little bit more tonight. So picking up again in verse 1, behold what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.

[8 : 11] You see, verse 1 tells us to look at, to contemplate, to reflect on God's love, and it lifts adoption up as the object of wonder in terms of God's love. Look at how much God loves us.

We can tell how much he loves us because he has called us his children. He's adopted us, and we are his children. You see, after the cross, adoption is the greatest display of God's love for us.

And it's the greatest display of God's love for us for two reasons. First, because of the relationship that it creates. It creates a new relationship with God. And secondly, because it embodies the essence of grace. So first, we'll look at the relationship that it creates.

And I want to argue and help convince you to elevate adoption as the most precious Christian doctrine that we have in the faith. And so first, we're going to look at it in terms of the relationship that it creates.

I think it might be helpful to juxtapose adoption with justification. And I'm not saying justification isn't important. I'm not saying they're at odds with each other or anything like that. But it's helpful to juxtapose.

[9 : 15] Martin Luther famously said that justification is the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. And in large part, because Luther's shadow looms large and much of that for good reason, I think churches rooted in the Protestant Reformation, great solid churches, have tended to, if I can say, overemphasize justification sometimes at the expense of adoption.

And so what I want to say is it's not justification, but it's adoption that is the most precious Christian doctrine. And I love justification. Justification is the primary blessing in terms of, it's the first blessing.

It's sort of what gets us into the door because it meets our primary spiritual need. Our primary spiritual need is being made right with God because apart from the atoning work of Jesus on the cross, we stand under the just condemnation of God.

And justification meets that need for us. Because of what Jesus did, it declares us not guilty. But adoption is the highest blessing. If justification is the primary, adoption is the highest because of the richer relationship that it offers.

The main way we are to imagine our relationship with God is not God as judge, but God as father. And so I'm not pitting justification against adoption. I'm saying we have to progress from one to the other.

[10 : 36] We progress from justification to adoption. Salvation is an amazing thing. It's so amazing that the New Testament has to use multiple metaphors to try to describe how amazing it is.

Justification is a legal metaphor. And so it deals with these forensic categories. And the people involved are a judge and a defendant in the space of a courtroom.

Whereas with adoption, it's a familial metaphor. The people involved are a parent and a child. And it's not the courtroom, but it's the kitchen table. It's the home. And so I think as we consider adoption as the most precious doctrine, I want us to move from the courtroom to the kitchen table is one way of putting it.

And if you think about, I think Jesus knows this. He modeled this for us. When he teaches us to pray, he doesn't say our judge. He says, pray like this, our father.

And as I was thinking about it, so my sister is adopted. She's from South Korea. We got her when she was a very little baby. And I was thinking about, what is it that makes my sister my sister?

[11 : 44] And in some sense, a judge somewhere signed a piece of paper that legally made Yoon Joo Wong, that was her Korean name, Kristen Annalise Antlitz. So in some way, a judge made her my sister, made her my parents' daughter.

But really, the judge just kind of made her a legal guardian. What really made her my sister in a much fuller sense was my parents' love and affection and investment of time and resources into her.

So I think we should think about adoption as the highest blessing, the most precious doctrine of the Christian faith because of the relationship. And secondly, I think the reason why we should esteem it very highly is because it embodies the essence of grace.

I'm going to say something very obvious here. To be an adopted child means that you're not a biological child, right? Very straightforward. We know this. To be adopted means to be chosen, which is a beautiful, powerful thing.

To be adopted means you're not a biological child. That means that nobody's born a Christian. Nobody is a biological son or daughter of God. We read that in our passage in the gospel.

[12:56] It is only those who received him to those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God. Children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

To become a child of God you have to be born again. It's a supernatural birth. And so we only become children of God through adoption. So what does this tell us about grace? Well, it tells us that God chose us.

And he chose us only out of his free grace. And I want to highlight just how amazing this is and how amazing the gospel that we read would have been to the original hearers by juxtaposing God's adoption for us to the standard practices of adoption in the Greco-Roman era.

So how did people back in Jesus' day adopt? So people needed to adopt. They were either infertile or because of high infant or child mortality rates. They just didn't have kids. And they needed a male heir to pass on all of their property, their land.

And so this is how they would do it. They would only adopt young men because men were the only ones who could own property. And they would choose people, right? They, whenever you adopt, you choose.

[14:06] And they would choose people based on their past track record of success. They would choose somebody who was of sound mind and sound body, who embodied the principles and the characteristics that would faithfully carry on the family name.

So they would choose somebody based on their past performance. Is this person fit to receive the inheritance that I want to pass on? I want to make sure this is a safe bet. That's how they would adopt children. But God adopts us in a completely opposite way.

He does it completely out of free grace. It has nothing to do with our past performance. It has nothing to do with our character. It has nothing to do with our future potential. J.I. Packer says this, we are not fit for a place in God's family.

The idea of his loving and exalting us sinners as he loves and has exalted the Lord Jesus sounds ludicrous and wild. Yet that and nothing less than that is what adoption means.

Adoption embodies free grace. It reminds me of Deuteronomy 7 when God is telling the Israelites why he chose them as a nation. He says, I didn't choose you because you're a great number or because you were this massive imperial force.

[15:13] I love you because I love you. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't have to make sense. God just loves us because he loves us. It's out of his free grace. It's pure grace. And his adopting us as his children embodies the essence of this grace.

It reminds me of Romans 5. For while we were still weak at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.

But God chose his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He adopted us when we were the unlovable children and it embodies grace. So I think because of that, I wanted to unpack adoption a little bit to show that it's the greatest expression of his love because of the relationship that it creates and that it embodies God's grace.

The next move I want to talk about is what adoption means for us as God's children. And very simply, what adoption means for us is that what is true about Jesus is true about us in Jesus.

As God's children, our Father intends for our lives to be a reflection and reproduction of Jesus' relationship with the Father. We see that in the second half of verse one.

[16:26] And this is true in a negative sense. It says, on account of this, on account of being God's children, the world does not know us because it didn't know him. So we can expect, as God's children, Christians can expect the same struggles, the same rejection that Jesus faced.

And much more could be said on this, but I want to focus our attention on verse two. The positive aspects of what was true about Jesus are true about us. So verse two, I'll read it again for us.

Beloved, we are already God's children, although what we will be has not yet been fully revealed. We know that when he is fully and finally revealed, we will be like him because we will see him as

he is.

And I want to say a couple things about this verse. This is a really helpful verse for unpacking just a really useful theological category. Theologians call it inaugurated eschatology.

Shorthand is called the already but not yet. And that's just throughout this entire verse. And the already but not yet is essentially this, that God's promises are already being fulfilled.

[17:30] They're already a reality in our lives. They're just not completely a reality in our lives. They're not yet fully and finally realized. But we trust and have confidence that God will finally make good on his promise.

And this is what Christians call hope. And this will figure prominently in verse three. We have a foretaste of the things now, but the best is yet to be. So I want to point that out in this verse and we'll see how it plays out.

The other thing I want to point out are the blessings. The blessings that are true of Jesus' life are also true of our lives because we have faith in Jesus. And the three things I want to highlight here are the blessing and the promise of resurrection.

And because of resurrection, the intimacy and access that Jesus had to the Father, we also enjoy as well as an inheritance. So first, the promise of resurrection.

This is maybe the understatement of the world. The resurrection is just a really big deal. And verse two is all about the resurrection. It's basically saying that when Jesus comes back, we are going to be raised to new life with Jesus.

[18:39] And all the things that he promised to us will come true. And the reason why resurrection is a really big deal as it relates to our sonship is because it was a really big deal as it related to Jesus' sonship.

So if without the resurrection, Jesus was just another false messiah or criminal who died a terrible death at the hands of the Romans. The resurrection was the vindication of Jesus that all the things he said about himself and all the things he said about the Father were true.

If he wasn't resurrected, Jesus was either a crazy person or he was a liar. He wasn't the Lord. And if he wasn't resurrected, we're still in our sins is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15.

So the resurrection figures very prominently in establishing and solidifying Jesus' identity as the Son of God. This is what it says in Romans 4.

Jesus was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. And so because we are convinced that Jesus was raised from the dead, we know that even if we go through the same struggles and hardships that Jesus went through, we are confident that just in the same way he was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, he'll come back.

[20:01] And when he comes back, that's the language of fully and finally revealed, when he comes back the second advent, we'll be like him. We'll see him just as he is. We'll see him face to face. It won't be by faith any longer.

We'll be like him. And baked into this, two other amazing blessings that we have by virtue of being in Christ. Our intimacy with and inheritance from the Father.

We get to enjoy the same intimacy and access with the Father that Jesus had with the Father because of what he did for us. This is what Jesus says in John 16. He says this to his disciples, I have said these things to you in figures of speech.

The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech, but will tell you plainly about the Father. In that day, you will ask in my name and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf for the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed me that I came from the Father.

So in the same way, the same sweet intimacy that Jesus had with the Father, we have with the Father because of Christ. And then Hebrews 4, 16 says, Let us then confess, let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

[21:21] I think sometimes as Christians, we take this sort of intimacy for granted. In the Old Testament times, not everyone had this sort of access to the Father. There was one person, the great high priest, who could go into the presence of God and that but once a year.

And if he did it wrongly, there was a rope tied around his waist because he would be struck dead and they'd have to pull him out. And because of what Jesus did for us, we can go into God's

presence freely with confidence to receive mercy and to find grace in our time of need. In addition to intimacy and access, we also have this great inheritance. We share the inheritance of Christ. This is an interesting thing in the book of Hebrews. I don't always imagine Jesus as my big brother, but that's how he's described to us.

If Jesus is the eternally begotten Son of God and we're also God's children, you connect the dots. Jesus is our brother. He's our older brother. He is inheriting the entire kingdom and by virtue of being brothers with Christ, children of God, we inherit the same inheritance of Jesus. Paul says this in Galatians. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.

[22 : 36] And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father, the same thing that Jesus prayed to the Father, we now pray by the Spirit.

So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. We inherit eternal life, an unmediated relationship with Jesus, dwelling with God forever in the world to come. So we're about to move onto the third move, but just in summary, we've unpacked adoption, why it's the most precious Christian doctrine, and what it means for us.

It means that the blessings of Christ are also ours. And so I want to move on to our final point. What does adoption require of us? This is what John says in verse 3.

Before that, this is essentially we're going to be talking about how then shall we live? What are we called to do? What is expected of us as God's beloved children? I'm going to read our whole passage for us just to give us context.

[23 : 38] Beloved, what manner, behold what manner of love the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. On account of this, the world does not know us because it did not know him.

Beloved, we are already God's children, although what we will be has not yet been fully revealed. We know that when he is fully and finally revealed, we will be like him because we will see him as he is.

And this is verse 3. And everyone who has this hope in him consistently purifies himself just as he is pure. So if you trust in Jesus Christ, you're a beloved child of God.

You're a beloved son or daughter. And everything that is true about Jesus is already but not fully yet true about you. We did nothing to earn it.

It's all grace. But that doesn't mean we don't have to do anything in response. As a child of God, there are certain expectations as to how you'll carry yourself.

[24 : 45] There are certain expectations when you're a part of the family of God. And this is true of every family that I've ever known. Think about your own family. Maybe it was having to do certain chores.

Maybe it was having to perform a certain way in school or to play a certain instrument or cheer for a certain sports team. I don't know what it was for you. But for all of us, there were certain things that it meant to be whatever your last name is.

An illustration in our life when we were having our first son, my version of nesting was to create a family crest. I was becoming a father for the first time and I was thinking, okay, what is it going to mean to be in antlets?

So as Susan was doing the really important things of getting our house ready so that our kid wouldn't just die immediately when he walked into our house, I was thinking through the various virtues and the obligatory Latin phrases that would be on my crest.

And one of them, this is one of the things that it means to be in antlets. They have to love beauty. And if my children don't love beauty, they're just not my children. And so we're starting to cultivate a love for beauty in music and going to museums and these sorts of things.

[25 : 55] So what does it mean to be in antlets? One of the things that it means is that you love beautiful things. You appreciate beautiful things. And I think what we see in verse three is something like the family expectations for being part of the family of God.

As a child of God, this is what your loving father expects of you. This is what it means to act like a Christian. And as I was reflecting on this verse a little bit more and praying about it, it's actually, it was kind of surprising.

It's not just an expectation. As verse three tells us, this is not just what God expects from his children. This is actually what characterizes his children.

A loving relationship with our father does not lead to spiritual complacency, but the opposite. It leads to faithful action. We want to please and honor our father. And so if we're children of God, we purify ourselves.

Everyone who has this hope, everyone who is hoping for the resurrection, that all the things that are true about Jesus will become true about us, consistently purifies himself just as he is pure.

[27 : 01] And I don't know about you, when I see purity language in the Bible, I get a little bit spooked because it's sacrificial language from the Old Testament. And purity language implies holiness. It implies being unblemished.

It implies being without defect or impurity. So what does this purity language mean for us in this passage? Does God expect us to be sinless?

The answer to that is by no means. Earlier in 1 John, this is what he writes. If we say we have no sin, and this is one of my most favorite verses.

I love this verse. It's deeply encouraging to me. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. Note that it doesn't say, in verse 3, that everyone who has this hope is pure, as he is pure, but purifies himself.

[28 : 02] And it's important to point out that this is not a once and for all action, meaning you purify yourself when you became a Christian, you purified yourself as he is pure. This is an ongoing, every day, every week kind of action.

We're to consistently purify ourselves. And it's interesting that this is what he chooses. This is the one thing that he says, if you have this hope in yourself, you are going to be consistently purifying yourself as he is pure.

So why this one thing? Why is he highlighting this? Well, I think he's highlighting one essential aspect of the Christian life. In many ways, this is what it means to be a Christian.

What is the Christian life? What does it mean to be a faithful son or daughter? It means to live a faithful life of repentance, a life of ongoing repentance. We keep short accounts with God.

We have regular rhythm of repentance that's part of our lives. That's why we pray the prayer of confession every day, every Sunday. We're to live a life of ongoing purification.

[29 : 03] And I want to tell you, as I'm wrapping up, I want to give you a spiritual practice, a spiritual discipline for how you can embody this, how you can put this verse into action.

Susan's grandfather, he passed away about a year ago. He was a great man of God. He was a missionary in West Africa for decades and then in Western Europe for a long time.

And this practice I learned from him, it's called spiritual breathing. And he was very funny about it. The first time I met him, he talked about spiritual breathing.

Anytime I saw him thereafter, he talked about spiritual breathing. He had these little cards, business cards, that said spiritual breathing and they had how to do spiritual breathing. So in many ways, what it means to be in Susan's family is to practice spiritual breathing.

And it's just such a great, it's a bit cheesy probably, but it's such a helpful analogy, spiritual breathing for the spiritual life. The analogy is, it's very obvious, very clear.

[30 : 04] To be alive physically, you have to breathe, right? You have to exhale and get rid of the carbon dioxide, the toxins, and inhale oxygen. And so what it means to be alive, first and foremost, is to keep breathing.

And spiritual breathing, the spiritual discipline, is basically the same thing, but with a spiritual analog. So this is basically what it is. This is sort of verbatim from Susan's grandfather's card.

This is how you do spiritual breathing. First, you exhale. You get rid of the toxins. You confess your sins. To confess your sins, you're just agreeing with God about your wrong attitude or your wrong action, and you repent.

You change your wrong attitude, your sinful attitude or action. You get rid of the junk that's preventing you from living a spirit-filled life. You breathe out.

You confess. You repent. And then after that, what do we do when we breathe? We inhale. We surrender ourselves to the Lord again. We remember God's love and our true identity as God's beloved children.

