

Becoming children of God.

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Date: 21 December 2025

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[0 : 0 0] One of the things that I really love about this time of year is meeting out of town family! It's always fun to see family resemblances. Gosh, I would have recognized you guys were! siblings anywhere. Or I knew you were her dad as soon as I saw you walk in. You may have recognized that our scripture reader this morning looks a lot like me. And that's because he's my son, Peter. These similarities usually go deeper than looks. Children often have similar facial expressions and share a lot of personality traits with their parents.

And these kinds of things aren't always limited to biology. My husband Tom and I got married when Peter was seven. And even though Tom and Peter aren't biologically related, people often think they are because they share a lot of the same mannerisms and they sometimes talk and act like each other. Some of you might have experienced this in your own lives with a step parent or with an adoptive parent. Well, this morning we're going to explore still another kind of parent-child relationship. A child born of God. We'll explore three questions as we dive into this passage together. First of all, who is a child of God? Second, how do we become children of God? And third, why would we want to become children of God? So would you pray with me?

Oh Lord, thank you that we can gather this morning. Would you be our teacher? Would you light our hearts? Thank you that you made your dwelling among us. We pray these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

So first of all, who is a child of God? John wrote his gospel to two main groups. First, the Jews. John uses the phrase, in the beginning, to draw a parallel with Genesis 1. And this is something that John's Jewish readers would have recognized immediately. The word we translate as word is the Greek word logos. And for the Jews, the logos was sacred. It was God's creative expression in the world, his word, and the articulation of his thoughts. The logos was himself a creator. The Jews probably would have assumed that John was addressing only them with this message. But John subverts this assumption in several places. In verse 7, he says that John the Baptist came as a witness that through him all might believe. Verse 11 says that he came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. His own clearly refers to the nation of Israel, the Jews.

[2 : 5 7] In verses 12 and 13, John says that to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. Children born not of natural descent, or of human decision, or of a husband's will, but of God. So already, observant Jews are getting a little bit uncomfortable. Wait, aren't we God's chosen people? What does all mean? And honestly, I think many of us stumble into the same problems as the Jews in Jesus' time. We assume that every verse in the Bible that praises the righteous applies to us, surely. We spend all our time with people like us that agree with us on everything, and we define our faith by our outward behavior. We're kind of like the Pharisee in Matthew's gospel, praying, thank God I'm not like that tax collector, that sinner over there.

And I think honestly that Jesus, what Jesus said about the Pharisees could apply to us. We're whitewashed tombs. We're good looking on the outside, but dead within.

And let me ask you, when you think about this first group, and how you might or might not identify with it, are you believing in the logos who formed you, or are you turning the tables and trying to be the logos, forming God in your image?

The other group John was addressing was the Gentile readers. Even though non-Jewish readers wouldn't have necessarily known the Old Testament, many of them would have connected with this word logos that John uses to name Jesus. Because for Greeks, in many pagan religions in the Greco-Roman world, the word logos meant divine wisdom, the ultimate revelation. Gentile readers would have realized that John was addressing them in these same verses I already mentioned, highlighted as being subversive above. They might have been reading this thinking, but wait, I

thought Jesus was Jewish.

I don't really have any contact with Jews. This kind of seems like something for other people, even though it says all. Why would I want to be a part of this? Or, everybody gets to be a child of God? [5 : 27] Okay, great. That sounds great. I get a free pass. Maybe I don't have to do anything. I just am. I'm just a child of God. And I think here, too, there are a lot of parallels. A lot of us identify with this, too. Hey, this child of God thing sounds like unconditional love, so I can do whatever I want. Or, yeah, that whole children of God thing doesn't apply to me. That's for somebody else. That's for these people over here. I'm not interested. And all of these rest on assumptions about God.

If you connect more with this second group, let's think for a second. Is it wise to stake a decision this important about whether we want to be a child of God, whether we are a child of God? Is it wise to stake a decision this important on an assumption about who God is? Or would you be willing to let him speak for himself? Honestly, we're probably somewhere in the middle or a combination, of these groups. But John subverts the expectations of both. To those who receive and believe, Jesus gave the right to become children of God, full stop. We'll talk more about that phrase, he gave the right, in just a minute. But first, we're going to talk about how we become children of God.

Well, John tells us. We believe in his name. It's simple, right? Okay. It's simple, but maybe not easy. I want to unpack this word believe a little bit. Sometimes we use the words believe and know and understand almost interchangeably. But there's a really important difference. Because as Beth Moore says, we act out of what we believe, not what we know. And why is this the case? Well, I think it's because when we believe in something, we're invested in it. We're affirming it. We're confessing it. We're entrusting ourselves to that thing, and we're proclaiming it with confidence. At least that's what John means here when he uses the word believe. For almost 2,000 years, Christians all over the world have confessed the Nicene Creed together as a statement of faith. Almost every bishop that came to Nicaea to help write that creed in the fourth century was maimed in some way, or bore physical scars, or had been exiled from his homeland because of his faith. Friends, they acted out of their belief faith that Christ is the son of the living God. And many of them had been tortured because of their faith. There were many people that didn't make it to the council at all because they had been martyred.

And they didn't do this because they knew something, because they knew facts about Jesus. They gave up their health and their lives because they believed in his name. So let's look at that phrase, in his name. People in the Greco-Roman world believed in the power of a name. A name was more than what you called someone. Speaking someone's name was a recognition of their personality, of their power, and their attributes, their internal qualities. It was their whole person. And we see the same thing play out in the Bible, especially when God was inviting someone into a new call and identity.

[9 : 05] God changed Jacob's name to Israel, Abram's name to Abraham. One of the most powerful scenes in the New Testament is when Jesus says to his disciples, who do you say that I am? And Peter steps forward, Simon Peter steps forward and says, you are the Messiah, the son of the living God.

And in response to Peter's confession, Jesus blesses him and he gives him a new name and he says, I tell you that you are Peter. And on this rock, I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. So when John writes this phrase to those who believed in his name, he's saying to those who entrust themselves to Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

So what does it mean then that we have the right to become children of God? To answer this question, let's head back to that earlier point about the parallels with Genesis 1. In the beginning of creation, the earth was formless and empty and darkness was over the surface of the deep. As we watch the beauty and the perfection of creation burst forth, we see God bringing order out of chaos, separating the light from the darkness. God saw that the light was good, Moses writes. Man and woman, the crown jewels of God's creation are given freedom to rule and to cultivate the garden. But we know the rest of the story, don't we? They eat from the tree and sin and evil enter the world.

[10 : 47] As Paul writes in Romans, all creation was in bondage to decay. Sit with that phrase, in bondage to decay.

We were enslaved.

As the darkness clears away. Jesus makes the darkness light. The unclean clean. We see this all throughout the Gospels.

But how does he actually do this? What's the mechanism? How does he set us free from this bondage to decay? So far we've seen that Jesus is God.

That he coexisted with the Father. That he was, as we just sang, word of the Father. Begotten, not created. He's the light and the logos. The actual mechanism, though, was this.

[12:03] The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, Throughout the New Testament, the word flesh is often used in a negative or a punitive sense.

The flesh is the seat of our evil, sinful desires. It's decaying and corrupt. And yet, Jesus took on flesh. But with one important difference.

The writer of Hebrews says it well. For we do not have a great high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses. But one who has been tempted in every way.

Just as we are. But without sin. Tim Keller. Jesus did not just die the death we should have died. He lived the life we should have lived. Fourth century bishop Gregory of Nazianzus said it beautifully when he wrote, Whatever was not assumed was not healed.

Meaning, Christ's incarnation both unites us with God and redeems and restores our fallen human nature to what it was always created to be. So we see that this union with God through Christ is possible for those who receive and believe in his name.

[13:26] And that he made it possible through taking on flesh and making his home among us.

The phrase, gave them the right, means that our freedom and ability to choose our human nature were restored.

But what does this really mean? What are the implications of being God's children? Or put another way, why would we want to be God's children? Let's go back to our discussion of biological family from the beginning of the sermon.

All of us get our DNA from two biological parents. 50% from our mother. 50% from our father. So think just for a minute about what Jesus might have looked like when he walked the earth.

And I'm not talking about paintings you might have seen him in or stained glass or icons. What did he look like? When he was a living, breathing human being.

And what about Jesus' father? Jesus didn't have two biological parents, did he? Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of God overshadowed her.

[14:33] So while Jesus was formed in her womb, just like all of us, we can't be sure exactly how that typical 50% DNA transfer normally coming from a human father happened.

Other than that, it was miraculous. But I think what it's safe to say is that Jesus probably looked a lot like Mary. It was probably really easy to tell that she was his mother.

Especially because she was his only human parent. Jesus and John the Baptist might have looked alike too. Because Luke tells us that they were related.

Jesus was adopted by his earthly father, Joseph. And shared Joseph's trade as a carpenter. So they likely shared many other similarities too. But already his family was very different from the families around him.

And we see Jesus redefining family even more as an adult. When he says, my mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and who put it into practice.

[15:33] In a culture that revered biological families above all else, this was a shocking thing to say. It was also shocking that Jesus never got married. And he left his widowed mother at home to travel and to teach.

And his genealogy that you read about in Matthew's gospel was really spotty. It was not something you would put on your wall.

There were lots of kind of shadowy characters in that lineage. So just like us, he knew the joy and sorrow of a human family. So like I said, I think we can assume that Jesus looked a lot like Mary. But he also looks like God, his father. John writes in verse 18 that Jesus has made God known. And Hebrews 1.3 says that the son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.

The passage from Isaiah that Peter read this morning extends this radiance to us. If we become his children. You will be a crown of splendor in the hand of your God.

[16:44] A royal diadem in the hand of the Lord. No longer will they call you deserted or name your land desolate. But you will be called my delight is in her and your land married.

In the Bible, a royal diadem was a headpiece or an ornamental crown that symbolized a specific kind of authority and power. It was often decorated with precious gemstones or carvings. It was really elaborate. The Jewish high priest in the Old Testament wore a diadem as a symbol of his office. What Isaiah is saying here is that when we entrust ourselves to Jesus Christ as the Messiah, we reflect his beauty, his light, and his power. Paul writes to the Ephesians that in love, God predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ. In Greco-Roman culture, adoption wasn't just something that happened between adults and children.

It was also an economic thing. Wealthy, upper-class families who didn't have a male beneficiary for their estate could adopt someone by just naming them in their will. Caesar Augustus, the emperor reigning at the time of Jesus' birth, was adopted by Julius Caesar this way.

[18:01] Just named him in his will. And he inherited Julius Caesar's estate and he assumed his name. But Paul takes this concept of economic adoption and he expands it far beyond anything we could possibly imagine.

Reminding us that our primary identity is no longer our earthly family. But as children of God, not receiving an earthly inheritance, but sharing in all the rights and privileges of God's heavenly family. Some of you may have experienced this reality in the body of Christ. You may share deeper relationships with your spiritual family than your biological family.

And that's okay. In fact, it's beautiful. Because God has adopted us. We're co-heirs with Christ. We inherit God's glorious riches because of his kindness expressed through Christ.

And we become siblings with those who have come before us. Those sitting right here with you now. And most incredibly, with Jesus himself.

[19:09] We start to take on a new family resemblance. To God, our Father. And to Jesus Christ, our big brother. God who transfers us from the domain of darkness where we used to live.

And into the kingdom of his beloved son. So back to that last question. Why would we want to become children of God?

Friends, why would we not want to be? As we close, I want to invite you to consider three things. Is there something keeping you from believing in his name? Because we all believe and serve something.

Whether we acknowledge it or not. Maybe you want to believe, but you feel uncertain. You hear stories like the one I just shared about the Council of Nicaea. And you think, I could never have that kind of faith.

[20:12] How could anyone? Friends, I've got great news. God's grace works through Jesus. Not the strength of your belief. Through Jesus, we have fellowship with the Father.

When we cry out to him, help my unbelief. He responds. John writes in Revelation, here I am. I, Jesus, stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person. And he with me. All you have to do is open the door. Or maybe you're in one of those camps I talked about earlier.

You believe a set of rules about Jesus or outward behavior. Or you feel like you're doing okay without him. But either way, you're missing that fellowship. That joy of life with Jesus, of being part of the family of God.

Wherever you are on that spectrum, would you commit to reading the book of John? And then come talk to me. Or Thomas or Jeff. Ask Jesus to reveal himself in these pages.

[21:17] To show you what life with him can really be. Read where he says, if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed. Friends, he means this. He means it. He will set you free.

Open the door. If you do believe, can you bear witness about the light? Just like John the Baptist. Henry Nouwen wrote, your true identity is as a child of God.

This is the identity you have to accept. Once you have claimed it and settled in it, you can live in a world that gives you much joy as well as pain. Because the identity that makes you free is anchored beyond all human praise and blame.

You belong to God. And it is as a child of God that you are sent into the world. Who are we sharing this good news of the gospel with?

Who are we declaring our identities as children of God to? We testify to the light so that all might believe. We reflect his light. We are his royal diadem and crown of splendor.

[22 : 26] Some of you probably took the evangelism class this fall with Pastor Jeff. And he gave out lots of great resources to equip us to share this good news with others. If you weren't able to take the class, feel free to reach out to Jeff, and he can send some of these things over to you.

Can you invite someone who doesn't know Christ into your life? Share your story. Share a meal with them. Share his grace and truth with them. Everything good and beautiful about us reflects the heart of God to a hurting and broken world.

John Newton wrote so many years ago in the hymn, Pensive Doubting, Fearful Heart. All thy wastes I will repair. Thou shalt be rebuilt anew. Share with others what the God of love has done in your life.

And lastly, all that we've talked about this morning leads us to worship. Worship. Many years ago, I heard someone, I don't remember who, say, pain clouds perspective, worship restores it.

When we really sit with the reality of what Christ has done for us, when we entrust himself, when we entrust ourselves to Christ as Messiah, worship is a natural response.

[23 : 50] Again, we respond like Isaiah in that passage that we read. We delight greatly in the Lord. We let our souls rejoice in him. We acknowledge that he has given us a new name, that he delights in us and has clothed us in garments of salvation.

We join with Mary and we say, my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit exalts in God my Savior, for he has looked with mercy on my lowliness.

And from now on, all generations will call me blessed. Begin and end each day with praise and thanksgiving for God's staggering mercy and kindness.

Friends, our King and Savior is here. Come, let us adore him. Let's pray. Oh, Lord, we thank you that your light shines in the darkness, that the darkness has not overcome it.

Thank you that you give the right to those who believe in your name to become children of God. Lord, we pray for courage to open the door if we haven't done that.

[25 : 06] And, Lord, we pray for courage to share our faith. And, Lord, we worship you because you are seated on the throne far above all rulers and authorities. And we magnify and praise your mighty name.

Amen.