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First John
III. We Are God's Children Now
I John 2:28 – 3:3

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

Edward Langerak, a professor of philosophy at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, told the following story in a chapel address:

I once knew a little boy. When he was seven years old, this boy made a mistake that left a deep impression on him. He walked into a drug store and tried to steal some penny candy. He was unsuccessful, but instead of being reported to the police was made to go home and tell his parents what he had done . . . He had fleeting thoughts of breaking his arm on purpose, of running in front of a car, of doing anything that would relieve him of the dreadful conversation with his parents. But the conversation took place. The boy's father had one immediate reaction: "My son is a criminal." Those words cut to the heart. They were terrible, but they were true: seven years old – a criminal. But the boy's weeping mother took only a few seconds to respond to that verdict: "My son is not a criminal; he's going to be a preacher."

Langerak then concluded:

I was that boy, and my mother's response was a lesson in love. My father loved me too, loved me enough to say what was true. I had done something that, at that moment, defined me as a thief. But he did not say the whole truth; my mother saw the possibility in me, saw what I could do, not just what I had done . . . The way that my mother loved me then taught me much about how to love . . .

Suppose there were a person who always saw the possibilities in you, who always forgave you for what you are and who constantly, sympathetically challenged you to become what you should be. And suppose this person is not just anyone, but is a person to whom you and everyone else is ultimately responsible. Would not such a person enable you to discover the power of love, to realize the truth of the claim that only the loved can love?¹

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us,” says John, “that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” There is indeed Someone who loves us just as much in our failures as in our successes, who loves us just as much in our private unvarnished self as in our public well-edited self, who loves us just as much in our disobedience as in our obedience. “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.” In a world full of voices that tell us we are how we look, we are what we achieve, we are who we know, we are what we own, there is one great Voice that calls us “Beloved” just because we are – no matter how we look, what we achieve, who we know, what we own. In this world where love must be earned and “what have you done for me lately,” there is one Person who loves us utterly without conditions: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”

But not only are we loved unconditionally in this present moment, but that same love of God for us also opens up for us a glorious future. “Beloved,” writes John, “we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” That glorious promise reminds us of two things – two Easter resurrection of Jesus Christ things. First, that despite all that is wrong in the world today; despite all that is hurtful and hateful, violent and vile; despite the presence of so much sickness and sadness and the constant specter of death – in the end, the Kingdom of our Lord and Savior will come. All will be redeemed. All will be made right and good. His Kingdom shall come and all the children of God shall live happily ever after. The Anglican scholar and bishop N. T. Wright says it this way – one of my favorite things that he has written:

*The resurrection spreads out before us **the map of God’s new world**. When Jesus of Nazareth came out of the tomb on Easter morning, in his transformed, renewed body, having gone through death itself and out the other side, he gave the world the first glimpse of the fact that God is in the business, not of abandoning this sad old world . . . but of redeeming, renewing, transforming this world . . .*

*The point is this. What was **begun** with the resurrection will be **continued** until it is finished . . .²*

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” Which means the second Easter promise those words point us toward is the fact that not only shall the world itself be made good and right and beautiful in the Kingdom of God, but that we ourselves, individually and together, shall also be so transformed – and are even now being transformed as the beloved children of God. Transformed until we at last are good and right and beautiful in the sanctified image of Christ our Savior. Because we are God’s children now, someday we will become perfectly the people we always wanted to be – and which God always intended for us to be.

Several years ago, a writer named Leslie Leyland Fields was tasked by Christianity Today magazine to attend and report on one of Hollywood’s endless self-congratulatory awards ceremonies – the Oscars or Golden Globes or something like that. She describes glamping herself up as best as she could – hair and makeup and her best black chiffon dress (which she discovered

had a visible hole in it five minutes before the ceremony!). But, for all that, nothing had her ready for her encounter with the gorgeous celebrities: *“I slunk into the ballroom feeling disheveled and underdressed . . . I found myself surrounded by flocks of unearthly beautiful people . . . I could hardly stop staring. Among such company, I was, at best, faceless.”* But reflecting on this experience later, she wrote that no matter how unearthly beautiful those celebrities were, still it is nothing compared to how beautiful all of us who are now the children of God will one day be:

I have reason to hope, because there is another red carpet day coming. The screen will roll back, and out from a blinding flash of light, he will emerge. We will see his face and form and gasp: Here is what we have been longing for all our short lives. Here is where all the beauty comes from. And as he comes near, when we look close in his face, we will finally be given our own true faces, like his: holy, human, beautiful.³

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

And then comes John’s main point on our being the children of God now, destined to be like Christ as we dwell with Him in the beauty and redeemed perfection of His Kingdom forever: *“And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”* *“And everyone who thus hopes in him”* – everyone who has received the grace of Jesus Christ, everyone who has received this promise of new and eternal life in Jesus Christ, everyone who is now a child of God – *“And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as [Jesus Christ] is pure.”* Meaning that, by that grace of Jesus and because of that promise and hope laid before us in Jesus, as those who are even now called and confirmed as the children of God, we are to begin living even now into that vision of what we shall one day be. Even now we are to both desire and choose, both strive and practice, to reform and reframe our lives in light of the One who has made us children of God. *“And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”* If as the children of God we shall one day be like Him – then our work, our goal, our striving now should be to do all that lies within our power to be remade in Christ’s image.

John then even adds a stick to that carrot of hope we have in Jesus as the children of God. He says that the last thing any of us should want is for Christ to return, only to find us unprepared, unready, and unchanged when we go to meet Him: *“And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.”* Eugene Peterson’s translation of that same verse in his contemporary Bible, *The Message*, drives the point home even more clearly: *“And now, children, stay with Christ. Live deeply in Christ. Then we’ll be ready for him when he appears, ready to receive him with open arms, with no cause for red-faced guilt or lame excuses when he arrives.”⁴* In other words, to be a child of God now, beloved of the Father, means that our responsibility, our life-work, our participation in the promise of the coming Kingdom, is that we do all we can now to make ourselves ready for that coming day. We don’t just hope for the Kingdom of God, we prepare ourselves for that day when our King returns. We work now for what we shall then be in that Kingdom: *“And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”* *“Purifies himself as Jesus is pure.”*

So how do we do that? Well, first off we must remember and acknowledge that the only One who can truly change us into the likeness of Jesus is Jesus Himself – by the power of His grace and love. C. S. Lewis reminds us of this in one of my favorite passages from Mere Christianity:

If we let Him – for we can prevent Him, if we choose – He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a . . . dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly . . . His own boundless power and delight and goodness.⁵

Only Jesus can truly change us into what we are to become – which is to be like Jesus.

But that doesn't mean we don't have a part – a critical part – to play in our transformation. What is our part, our work, our contribution – that which will keep us from being ashamed and red-faced when Jesus returns, purifying ourselves as Jesus Himself is pure? “*Abide in him,*” says John, “*Abide in him.*” “*And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.*” Abide in Him. To be ready for Christ then, our work is to abide in Him now.

“*Abide in him.*” Stay close to Him every day. Deeply invest our lives in Him and in His Word and in His Church. Abide in Him.

A pastor tells of a church member who has taken up painting with watercolors. To master watercolor painting, one must learn and develop and practice and perfect a whole host of skills, insights, facts, techniques, and understandings. It is not something which can be undertaken half-heartedly if one has any hope of producing anything worthwhile. And so the church member one day made an interesting comment about all that her new commitment had meant for her. She told the pastor that she started out thinking that she was taking up watercolor painting, but that now she feels it is more accurate to say that watercolor painting has taken her up – and is slowly changing her from day to day.

In the same way, says the pastor, abiding in Jesus – the work assigned to us now as the children of God, that we should be ready and rightly formed on the day Jesus returns – abiding in Jesus means that we should take up, practice, and master certain Christian skills, insights, teachings, techniques, and attitudes. We practice our abiding in Christ through such disciplines as daily prayer, weekly worship, Bible study, Sunday School, Wonderful Wednesdays, service to others, bearing witness to others, and so on and so forth – the ABC's of the Christian life.⁶

And, in taking up such practices in order to prepared for Jesus when He comes – that we might be found in readiness when that day arrives – what we discover is that these practices are in fact taking us up and transforming us. That Jesus is using these practices as a way to get inside of us and to change us, purify us, from the inside out. In doing the work of preparing now for the coming Kingdom of God, we discover that the Kingdom of God is already now preparing us to live in that Kingdom forever. The more we, with discipline and determination, daily look at Jesus,

the more Jesus is able to use our discipline and determination to make us look like Jesus! The more we look at Jesus, the more we begin to look like Jesus. *“And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”*

Another story – same point. The story is told of St. Francis of Assisi walking down a road one day with his good friend and companion, Brother Leo. Sensing that Leo was a bit depressed, Francis turned to him and asked him, *“Leo, do you know what it means to be pure in heart?”*

“Of course. It means to have no sin, faults, or weaknesses to reproach myself for.”

“Ah,” said Francis, “now I understand why you’re so sad. We will always have something to reproach ourselves for.”

“Right,” said Leo. “That’s why I despair of ever arriving at purity of heart.”

“Leo, listen carefully to me. Don’t be so preoccupied with the purity of your heart. Turn and look at Jesus. Admire him. Rejoice that he is what he is – your Brother, your Friend, your Lord and Savior. That, little brother, is what it means to be pure of heart. And once you’ve turned to Jesus, don’t turn back and look at yourself. Don’t wonder where you stand with him.

“The sadness of not being perfect, the discovery that you really are sinful, is a feeling much too human . . . Focus your vision outside yourself on the beauty, graciousness and compassion of Jesus Christ . . .”

After a long pause, Leo said, “Still, Francis, the Lord demands our effort and fidelity.”

“No doubt about that,” replied Francis. “But holiness is not a personal achievement . . . It doesn’t come by your Herculean efforts and threadbare resolutions.”

“Then how?” asked Leo.

“Simply hoard nothing of yourself; sweep the house clean. Sweep out even the attic, even the nagging painful consciousness of your past. Accept being shipwrecked. Renounce everything that is heavy, even the weight of your sins. See only the compassion, the infinite patience, and the tender love of Christ. Jesus is Lord. That suffices. Your guilt and self-reproach disappear into the nothingness of non-attention. You are no longer aware of yourself, like the sparrow aloft and free in the azure sky. Even the desire for holiness is transformed into a pure and simple desire for Jesus.”

Leo listened gravely as he walked along beside Francis. Step by step he felt his heart grow lighter as a profound peace flooded his soul.⁷

Abide in Him. Look to Him. Invest our hearts and minds and bodies in His Word. For the more we look to Him, the more He will make us look like Him. And profound peace will begin to flood our souls.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are . . . Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

¹ From a chapel talk given at St. Olaf. I have lost the exact reference information.

² Tom Wright, The Way of the Lord (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 110-111.

³ Leslie Leyland Fields, “The Power and the Glory,” Christianity Today, Vol. 55, No. 7 (July, 2011), p. 66.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2225.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 174-175.

⁶ William H. Willimon, “Christianity: Following Jesus,” in Pulpit Resource, Vol. 28, No. 4 (October, November, December, 2000), p. 18.

⁷ Quoted in Brennan Manning, “Shipwrecked,” The Plough Reader, Autumn, 2002, pp. 37-38.