

### **I John 3:1-3**

“You don’t like me anymore.”

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Our four-year-old daughter Emmie tried this one out on me the other afternoon after I intervened on behalf of her younger sister Reese during a squabble about a toy. Emmie hung her head, turned her back, and murmured (just loud enough so I could hear it), “You don’t like me anymore.” I swear that at that moment two things happened, my heart felt like someone had punched me right in the chest; and I could sense my parents, somehow supernaturally aware thousands of miles away in Arkansas, reacting with a sort of guilty glee, “Now, see what it feels like? All those times you fired those little missiles at us when you were a boy - stings don’t it?”

Once I got past the initial chest pain, and said a little prayer asking forgiveness for all the terrible things I’d done as a child, I began to think about how to address this with Emmie. How do you get through to a four-year-old, to your own child, that you not only like her, but will always love her, no matter what? As it turns out, for Emmie that’s easy. I gave her a big hug, reintroduced the concept of sharing through playing with her and Reese for a few minutes, and praised Emmie when she was gentle and giving to her younger sister. If only it were that easy with adults.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God”.

This can be a hard concept to grasp. “See what love the Father has given us”, why would he do that? Most of us lose sleep at night not because of how sure we are that God’s love is well-deserved in our lives. Rather, it’s the opposite. At some point we see and feel the darkness in ourselves and it makes us shudder, makes us wonder how it could be that God Almighty tolerates us, much less loves us. And if we dare to presume some love from God, do we really see ourselves as worthy of the status of “children of God”? Childish towards God and each other is probably more accurate. And most of what we see in the world around us reinforces this pattern of thought. Consider that the worst genocide of modern memory occurred in Rwanda. “In just three months, 850,000 Rwandans were killed. Theologian and ethicist David Gushee asked how such brutality could have occurred in ‘the most Christianized country in Africa.’ Churches, seminaries, schools

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and benevolent organizations were scattered all over the country. Ninety percent of Rwandans claimed to be Christians, ‘And yet,’ Gushee writes, ‘all of that Christianity did not prevent genocide, a genocide which church officials did little to resist, in which a large number of Christians participated, and in which, according to African Rights, ‘more people died in churches and parishes than anywhere else.’ (David P. Gushee, ‘Church Failure, Remembering Rwanda’ in *The Christian Century*, April 20, 2004, p. 28).”<sup>1</sup>

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God”? Many of you will recognize this passage in First John from baptismal rites, where it is often quoted. And that is most appropriate because, as William Barclay says, “there is something even in a name. Chrysostom, in a sermon on how to bring up children, advises parents to give their child some great scriptural name, to teach him repeatedly the story of the original bearer of the name, and so to give him a standard to live up to when he grows to adulthood. So the Christian has the privilege of being called the child of God. Just as to belong to a great university, a distinguished military regiment, a great church, a great household is an inspiration to fine living, so, even more, to bear the name of the family of God is something to keep a person’s feet on the right way and to set him to climbing.”<sup>2</sup>

And yet, and yet...Gushee, reflecting on Rwanda, counters Barclay’s encouraging concept by observing “The presence of churches in a country guarantees nothing. The self-identification of people with the Christian faith guarantees nothing. All of the clerical garb and regalia, all of the structure of religious accountability, all of the Christian vocabulary and books, all of the schools and seminaries and parish houses and Bible studies, all of the religious titles and educational degrees – they guarantee nothing.”<sup>3</sup>

“Children of God”? How do we reconcile this with our own experience, our own lives, closer to home? In the midst of divorce, abuse and addiction, gluttony, larceny, apathy, infidelity, depression, grief, loss and a host of other dark places of the human condition, how do experience, really

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<sup>1</sup> Sayles, G. “We Will Be Like Jesus”, taken 4/29/06 from <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=547>

<sup>2</sup> Barclay, W. *The Letters of John & Jude*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976, pp. 73-74

<sup>3</sup> Sayles, G.

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understand ourselves as “children of God”? Do our feet feel like they’re on the right way most of the time, do we feel like we’re climbing in faith? For those of you who can say “Yes” I say “thanks be to Jesus, I am so happy to hear it. Alleluia.” But I see a steady stream of folks coming through my office doors at the church and in my private psychotherapy practice that feel a long ways away from being “children of God”. The profit margins of the major pharmaceutical manufacturers of anti-anxiety and anti-depression medications are built on that feeling of guilt, alienation, despair. So while we may be called the children of God, we know better, we feel worse. We can’t be the children of God.

John anticipates this protest from us, “we can’t be the children of God”. Observe the syntax of verse one “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God;” (PAUSE) “and that is what we are.” “It is by the gift of God that a person becomes a child of God. By nature a person is the creature of God, but it is by grace that she or he becomes the child of God. There are two words which are closely connected but whose meanings are widely different, paternity and fatherhood. Paternity describes a relationship in which a man is responsible for the physical existence of a child; fatherhood describes an intimate, loving relationship. In the sense of paternity all humans are children of God; but in the sense of fatherhood people are children of God only when he makes his gracious approach to them and they respond.

There are two pictures, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament which vividly set out this relationship. In the Old Testament there is the covenant idea. Israel is the covenant people of God. That is to say, God on his own initiative had made a special approach to Israel; he was to uniquely their God, and they were to be uniquely his people. As an integral part of the covenant God gave to Israel his law, and it was on the keeping of that law that the covenant relationship depended.”<sup>4</sup> According to the Old Testament covenant we are quite right in thinking “we can’t be the children of God.” We cannot keep the law, we cannot be good, we have failed to live up to the family name.

However, “in the New Testament there is the idea of adoption:

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<sup>4</sup> Barclay, W. *The Letters of John & Jude*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976, pp. 73-74

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Romans 8:14-17

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

1 Corinthians 1:9

*God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Galatians 3:26-27

*for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*

4:6-7

*And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!' So through God you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then an heir.*

Here is the idea that by a deliberate act of adoption on the part of God the Christian enters into his family.

While all people are children of God in the sense that they owe their lives to him, they become his children in the intimate and loving sense of the term only by an act of God's initiating grace and the responses of their own hearts."<sup>5</sup>

"Beloved, we are God's children now;" if you're having a hard time believing that, if you're like my little Emmie and murmuring to God, "You don't like me anymore", well here's your big hug, here's God reaching

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<sup>5</sup> Barclay, W. *The Letters of John & Jude*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976, pp. 73-74.

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down to reintroduce you to sharing, to being in right relationship with your brothers and sisters, to receiving blessing and honor. Ready? Consider the last part of verse one, “The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” If we don’t recognize ourselves as children of God it’s probably because we aren’t acting like Jesus, we’re acting more like the world, we look more like the world than Jesus. But the opportunity’s always open to change that. Our reputation is never so tarnished that God wants nothing more to do with us. Jesus took care of that for all time through his death and resurrection. The opportunity to follow Jesus, to daily transform and discipline our lives, to act like members of the holy family is always open, “what we will be has not yet been revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.”

Beloved, you are children of God. He is proud of you, he loves you, he has great plans for you – you, his beloved.