Children of God **by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 11th October 2026
at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Readings: 1 John 3:1-7

Introduction: the message of John

In the last few weeks we've been reflecting on the first letter of John, in which John has been describing different aspects of what it means to be a Christian. We saw that sticking to the basic truth of the Gospel is important, because what we believe influences what sort of relationship we think we can have with God.

We also saw that being a Christian isn't just about words but about living out our faith, what John calls "walking in the light". As Christians we need to live in the light and put away the darkness of sin and selfishness. This means living with integrity, and showing love to others, especially to other Christians, whether or not we find them easy to get on with.

The influence of significant people

Today I want to start with a question: looking back, who have been the most significant people in your life? Who has influenced you the most? I suppose that your answers might include not only those who have had a good influence on you, but also those whose influence has cast a shadow over your life, even if only for a while. Let us consider today those who have had a positive influence on us. I'm guessing that for

many of you, one or both parents, or grandparents, may have played that part.

As I have interacted with my own children, I've sometimes wondered how much I am like my father. In some ways we were quite different. Dad certainly was much better at planning ahead and getting to places on time than I am! We had a very different take on God and religion, although Dad, certainly in his latter years, was quite open-minded and seemed to value the benefit that faith brought to others.

My early memories of Dad include quite a bit of being on the receiving end of his anger when I and my brothers did wrong. Dad wasn't very good at showing tender feeings or expressing love in words. But I would look forward to his visits to my boarding school from the age of 9 when he would come, about once every 3 weeks, and take me out. I came to respect him as a person of integrity and decency, someone who was always reliable and could be trusted implicitly. I learned later from former work colleagues of Dad's at the London Symphony Orchestra, where he was a member of the Board of Directors, that he was respected for saying what he believed was right, regardless of political pressure, and not being afraid of being in a minority. I hope in this respect at least I am like him. Another positive trait of Dad was the ability to be diplomatic, and I try to be like this too.

Children of God

Thinking about our parents and significant members of our family helps us to discover something of who *we* are. And it is

this angle which John turns to in the third chapter of his first letter.

> "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are"[1].

John is writing towards the end of his life. He writes to the churches he has been involved with and, unlike Paul, who with his rabbinic background is keen to expound doctrine and argue his case, John keeps his message simple.

Now in chapter 3 he reminds us of the amazing truth that all who belong to Jesus are children of God. As Jesus says to Nicodemus in chapter 3 of John's gospel, we all need to be born "from above" or "born again"[2], in other words, born spiritually, in order to see or experience the Kingdom of God. And in the opening words of John's Gospel we read that "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God."[3]

The way this fits into John's previous argument is simply that if we really appreciate how wonderful it is that God has made us his own children, we won't have any truck with sin. When we realise how much God really loves us, we will want to be the very best we can be for him, to be like him even, just as I want to imitate the good traits of my father. When we realise what an amazing promise God has given us, that one day we will be with him and see him face to face, we will want to be like him now too. The key to understanding what John says

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[1] 1 John 3:1 NRSV
[2] John 3:3-6
[3] John 1:12 NRSV

about not sinning is in verse 3: “And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure”.

Not sinning?

Maybe you were wondering what John means when he writes

> “No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him”[4].

You may have been thinking, “well, that rules me out, then”. Wrong! Don't forget that in chapter 1 John writes,

> If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. [5]

Taken literally, it might seem that John is contradicting himself. But when we read the Bible, we need to recognise that sometimes a rhetorical device is being used. In chapter 3 John isn't really contradicting himself, he is exaggerating to make his point. What he is saying is, You can't have it both ways. You can't be a Christian, a child of God, and deliberately carry on doing something which you know is wrong. In the original Greek, the present tense is used here, expresses an action which continues or is repeated. John says, first consider what love God has shown you in making you his child, and then think about whether you are still going to carry on doing something you know is against his will. Or

[4] 1 John 3:6 NRSV
[5] 1 John 1:8-9 NRSV

whether you're going to continue to *avoid* doing something unselfish and generous which God *does* want you to do.

God our Father

Let's now take a moment to think about what it means to know God as your Father.

Very often our understanding of God is based on our experience of our parents, particularly our fathers, and our experience of people in authority. One of the classic causes of behavioural problems in young people, such as truancy, crime and violence, is a lack of a father. (Which, by the way, is one pretty relevant issue in the debate about what should be considered a "normal" family). I can't imagine that it would be much good for a child to grow up without a mother either, or a substitute mother figure.

I said earlier that one of the things my father was not good at was showing tender feelings. He wasn't really much good at hugging – in fact I can't remember ever getting a hug from my Dad. And I'm not much of a hugger either. So although, as I look back, I know that he did love me, I didn't experience that love in a very tangible way.

I think it's also important to recognise that we may also experience God as our mother. Categories of male and female are relevant to human beings, but God is neither male nor female, or, if you prefer, he embodies all that is good about what we consider both male and female characteristics. After all, Genesis chapter 1 tells us that human beings, male and female, are made in the image of God.

I wonder how much your experience of your parents has influenced your understanding and experience of God? Is what you lack in your relationship with God linked in some way to what you didn't get from your parents?

The good news is that we don't have to remain emotionally and spiritually stunted, just because our parents weren't perfect. There was a time when God met with me at a time of crisis in my life and my faith and brought me a new and real sense of his love as my Father. It was when I was 21, and taking part in an evangelistic outreach with a large group of young people in Barcelona. I'd had a difficult year spiritually after breaking up with my then girlfriend and living in France for 8 months as an English assistant teacher in a secondary school. I approached one of the leaders of the group for spiritual guidance, and he asked me about my relationship with my father. As he and his wife prayed with me, I felt an overwhelming sense of God's complete and unconditional love for me – a bit like a huge emotional and spiritual hug.

Whatever your experience of God to date, we can all benefit from asking God to renew our sense of his unconditional love for us. Good parents love their children simply because they are their children, not because they have earned their love. And we don't have to earn God's love either.

So I'll finish by reading again the first verse of John chapter 3. Then in the silence, you might like to reach out to God and ask for a fresh filling with his love.

> *"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are".*