

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 18: 25-30
SECOND LESSON: 1 John 3:1-7
April 18, 2021

“Children of God”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

There’s a number of interesting hymn collections out there for what we might call, “The Church of the Watered-Down Faith”. No one has come up with an equivalent for contemporary Christian music yet. I’ll defer that one to Frank. But for the traditional hymns we have:

- A Comfy Mattress Is Our God
- Joyful, Joyful, We Kinda Like Thee
- Above Average is Thy Faithfulness
- My Hope is Built on Nothing Much
- Blest Be the Tie That Doesn't Cramp My Style
- Oh, for a Couple of Tongues to Sing
- Pillow of Ages, Fluffed for Me
- I'm Fairly Certain That My Redeemer Lives
- What an Acquaintance We Have in Jesus
- When Peace, Like a Trickle. . .
- When the Saints Go Sneaking In
- AND, Where He Leads Me, I Will Consider Following

Yes, we laugh. But isn’t this where a lot of people actually ARE in their spiritual lives? We say we believe, but in a million small ways our compromises lead us away from God.

Our scripture today contains a wonderful promise—and a total paradox. First we hear what great love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God. We are children of God! But only a few sentences later 1 John says that no one who continues to sin has either seen or known God. But we know that that is flat out not true. Consider David, or Abraham, or Moses. Consider Peter, or Paul, or any of the disciples. And consider what the letter of 1 John itself states elsewhere, that if we say we are without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Clearly, we cannot take, “No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him,” at face value. The author is overstating, using exaggeration to make a point. And he probably is doing so because he is exasperated. Evidently the false teachers who are luring people away from the church are selling the idea that sin is now totally irrelevant. Their mantra was: *I belong to a totally spiritual god who has nothing to do with this material world, so it doesn’t matter what I do with my body!* Today’s version among Christians might be: *I’m saved, so it doesn’t matter what I do.* And among people sitting outside of the

community of faith and looking in—*Everything is relative. It's all a matter of profit and loss, specifically that I profit and don't suffer loss. Morality is a subjective concept.* These are all seductive arguments, except that it does matter what we do. Every action we take has an impact on others. And if we do have a relationship with God, doing things that we know are wrong **should** bother us—a lot. God is perfect. The truth is the closer to God we come, the more our defects stand out.

What does it mean to be a child of God? In one sense, we're all children of God. Every living human being is a child of God. But that is not what is being spoken of here. To be a child of God in the creation sense does not necessarily refer to a two-way relationship. We can be a child of God simply because we exist, but live in such a way that we are in direct opposition to God. People can reject God. People can also choose evil. We don't usually think of such people as children of God. Children of the devil, maybe, but not of God.

What 1 John speaks of is another level of being a child of God. We are adopted into the family of God through Christ. Jesus is our brother and has made us co-heirs with him. We have entered into a different relationship with God, one that is two-way. God loves us, and we love God. The process of healing has begun. 1 John says, "now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known." God has begun to heal and transform us from the inside out, but it will take time. What will be is being born out of what was. It is only when Christ appears that everything will be completed. Then we will be like Christ.

Being a child of God in this "adopted into the family" way does not make sin impossible. *That would be nice!* But we are all capable of sin. Being in a close relationship with God through Christ and then choosing to sin, however, is actually work. That annoying thing called a conscience starts going off like a loud smoke alarm. We feel guilty. We're uneasy. We have to drown out all those thoughts telling us we are making a mistake, or being selfish, or doing the wrong thing. We CAN do that wrong thing, but we have to deliberately tune out God and decide to do it. We are all capable of it—making decisions that we know are wrong but wanting something so badly we do it anyway. But the presence of God in our lives means that every dark or questionable deed will suddenly have a spotlight on it. God also has a nice way of tripping us up and trying to stop us from self-destructing.

1 John is basically saying that anyone who deliberately lives selfishly and sinfully cannot possibly be a genuine Christian, because the Holy Spirit working in that person would make that intolerable. Jesus put it another way. "By their fruits you will know them." Someone can talk a good talk. They can look great on the outside. Politicians are especially good at this. But once we start looking closer at the fruit of their lives we see what is really there.

Today we don't have a specific competitive group on our doorstep telling us that we can be spiritual and immoral at the same time, but that theme does seem to be around in general terms. We're pretty good at creating "spiritual" practices that have no moral impact. People can meditate for hours and then go commit bank fraud. If our only standard of what is right and wrong is what personally feels good, our lives will drift all over the map, and we will leave the

wreckage of damaged relationships everywhere we go. People dismiss “sin” as an antiquated concept linked to a legalistic religion. But at the heart of the matter every concrete “sin” stems from basic raw self-centeredness. Our culture makes sin sound fun. But being in a relationship with someone who thinks they can do anything they want without regard to others is no fun at all. It almost doesn’t matter what form this takes. We all think of “sin” as dramatic, but the fact is it’s as common as dirt. Greed. Gossip. Grudge holding. Selfishness. Envy. Violence. Lying. Manipulating. Deceiving. Stealing. Lust. Pride. We don’t have to have an affair or commit murder to be a sinner. Just thinking about it is enough. But if this is what we are full of, we will not be able to stay in a close relationship with God, because the two don’t mix. Sin is like oil poured into water. The two will always separate.

We’re going to make mistakes. We’re going to sin sometimes. But we should not be fooled by people who claim to be spiritual but live lives contrary to the nature of God. It would be like telling your spouse, *“Look honey, I’m just going to cheat every now and again, okay? And you won’t mind if I smoke a little crack in the house with the kids, right? I won’t do it every day.”* This will not fly. It doesn’t work in our human relationships. It won’t work with God.

Temptations will come, because that’s life. People will mock our faith and act like our morality is ridiculous. They will misunderstand and think we’re being legalistic, when really, we know we blow it on a regular basis and are just living by grace. There will be times when our family, friends, neighbors and colleagues will not understand why we have the scruples we do. They’ll think we are ridiculously honest. They won’t understand when we forgive people who hurt us. They’ll try to get us riled up and it won’t work. They’ll want us to badmouth others and we will disappoint them. And this is because it is impossible to understand a relationship with God when viewed from the outside in. God must be experienced in order to understand this. God loves us so much God adopted us into God’s family. We are God’s beloved children, and living any other way no longer works for us. Amen.

Psalm 18: 25-30

- 25** To the faithful you show yourself faithful,
to the blameless you show yourself blameless,
26 to the pure you show yourself pure,
but to the devious you show yourself shrewd.
27 You save the humble
but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.
28 You, Lord, keep my lamp burning;
my God turns my darkness into light.
29 With your help I can advance against a troop;
with my God I can scale a wall.
30 As for God, his way is perfect:
The Lord’s word is flawless;
he shields all who take refuge in him.

1 John 3:1-7

3 See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. **2** Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. **3** All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

4 Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. **5** But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. **6** No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.