

Knowing God: *Can I Know God and Look Nothing Like Him?*

1 John 2:28-3:3

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on October 6, 2013

Introduction

- ❖ One of the greatest joys I've experienced in life is parenthood. I love having a daughter. It's been amazing to see this little baby grow into a little girl who has become a spitting image of her parents. I'm often asked who she looks like. Well if you're referring to the cute nose and great smile, then the obvious answer is her mother. But if you're talking about the big noggin and pasty complexion that burns after five minutes in the sun, then yeah that's me.
 - ▶ Good thing for her that she inherited more from her mother. But there's no escaping it. If she's my child, then she's going to look something like me. That's how God design it. **Like it or not, God determined that much of who we are would come from our parents.** We take after Mom and Dad in appearance, in personality, in temperament, and in mannerisms. That could be good or bad, but that is the natural order of things. Children take after their parents.

- ❖ Well in this morning's passage, the Apostle John is applying this principle of nature to the spiritual realm. In similar fashion, Christians take after their Heavenly Father. **Those who have been born of God will naturally resemble God, and that's how you tell who is a child of God.** If you meet someone who talks like God, thinks like God, cares like God, and loves like God, then you can be fairly sure you're looking at a child of God.
 - ▶ But the converse is also true. If a person bears no resemblance to God, then no matter how much they hang around God's place or God's people, no matter what they profess to believe, the lack of any likeness to the Father gives little reason to assume a relationship actually exists.
 - ***Can I know God and look nothing like him?*** The answer is No. If you look nothing like the Father, then you would have no basis for assurance, no reason to assume a relationship.

- ❖ But that's why John is writing. **To give assurance. To give a reason to assume we do have a relationship with God.** He states this purpose in chapter 5:13: *"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life."*
 - ▶ So he is writing to those he believes to be Christians, and he's teaching them how to know you have eternal life, how to know you're a child of God.

- ❖ **So this morning I want us to consider three descriptions of God's children, three identifying characteristics.** According to our passage, the children of God are **1) Objects of an alien love, 2) Strangers in an alien land, and 3) Reflections of an alien likeness.**
 - ▶ As we continue, I encourage you, if you call yourself a Christian, to ask, *"Does this describe me? Am I truly a child of God?"* You're not admitting to a lack of faith to ask that. In fact, we're commanded in the Bible to make our calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10). We're told to test ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5).
 - And for those who are not Christians, I encourage you to contemplate the greatness of God's love that he would even make it possible for messed up people like us to become his children. I hope you realize you're among God's children this morning. I hope you'll join us in his family.

Objects of an Alien Love

- ❖ So let's start in **3:1**. "*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*" Notice with me that the children of God are described here as objects of an alien love.
 - ▶ Let me explain why I use the term 'alien'. I get it from John's choice of words. He begins with a command to see, to behold, to examine carefully. What are we looking at? See *what kind of love the Father has given to us*.
 - John Stott points out that the phrase "*what kind of*" (KJV, "*what manner of*") can be literally translated "*of what country*". Of what of country is this love? Listen to what Stott writes, "*It is as if the Father's love is so unearthly, so foreign to this world, that John wonders from what country it may come.*"

God's love is out of this world

- ❖ That's why I call it an alien love. **God's love is out of this world**. Remember when Jesus calmed the storm in Matthew chapter 8? After that his disciples asked, "*What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him!*" (8:27) That's the same phrase. What kind of man is this that he can even control nature? He's so unlike us. He must be from another world!
 - ▶ Well when you start to contemplate the love of God, you get the same reaction. You begin to doubt if such love is even possible since it's so unlike our love. It's so foreign, so alien, that at times we wonder if it's even real.

God's love is freely given

- ❖ What's so alien about it? **Just consider how freely this love is given**. When John says that the Father has given this love to us, he's saying that God's love is not something earned or deserved. No, this love of God is a gift that originates from the rich bounty of his mercy. It's something given, something bestowed (KJV), something lavished (NIV).
 - ▶ The point is that it's not given in the same way we give love – otherwise it wouldn't be alien. If the Father's love were given in response to a person's worth or importance, or their general friendliness, then how is that any different than the kind of love we sinners show each other every day? There would be nothing alien about that kind of love.
- ❖ I have no trouble giving you love if you're lovable. And even if you're not, I'm still willing if you show potential, if you have good intent. That's the kind love we're used to giving.
 - ▶ But God's love is so free (so lavish) that he gives it without any view to our worth, before we had done anything good or bad (Rom. 9:11), while we were full of evil intent. While we were still sinners and enemies, God sent his Son to die for us (Rom. 5:8,10). This kind of love is truly of another country. It's truly out of this world.
- ❖ I think a lot people have a difficult time accepting that such love exists because they grew up in homes and in cultures where love and approval had to first be earned. Until you proved yourself worthy by academic achievement or artistic/athletic distinction, you never experienced a lavishing of love, praise, and approval from family or friends.

- ▶ This is why some Christians still have a hard time accepting the kind of love the Father says he has for them. They live their lives trying to prove they're worth loving. What they don't realize is that he has already lavished his love on them to the fullest. **John Owen said that "the greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to him is *not to believe that he loves you.*"**

God's love adopts sons and daughters

- ❖ So to help Christians believe the greatness of the Father's love for them, John points to their heavenly adoption. "*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.*" **The great manner of God's love is demonstrated in the fact that he is willing to call us *child*.**
 - ▶ In the ancient Roman culture, in which John is writing, fathers ruled their households with absolute authority. Every time a child was born into the family, the newborn would be presented to the father, and he had the absolute power to determine its fate. By naming the baby, the father legitimated the child as one of his own.
 - But if he chose not to name the child, for any reason, the newborn would be exposed to the elements and left to die. It was a wicked practice, but the one thing it teaches is just how important it was to have a father call you his child. That significance would not have been lost on John's original audience.
- ❖ Now adoption is not an alien practice for us. But to be honest, those of us who consider adoption are usually moved to adopt because we pity the innocent orphan or because we see something adorable in the child. **But to grasp the magnitude of God's love, we must understand what we were before he called us sons and daughters.**
 - ▶ We were not adorable, innocent, little orphans in a playpen. No, the Bible describes mankind as straying sheep, as children of the devil, as enemies of God. **And what's more, consider what it would cost the Father to adopt us.** He had to sacrifice his own Son. To call us as sons and daughters, the Father would have to forsake the Son.
- ❖ ***Now who on earth would adopt a child of the devil or a hostile enemy at the cost of his firstborn?*** God would – because his love is not of this earth. It's one thing to end hostilities with your enemies. It's another to make peace with them. But God's love goes even further. He actually takes them into his home to be a part of his family. He adopts us.

God's love begets new persons

- ❖ But, friends, God's love is greater still. **Beyond adoption, God's love actually begets new persons.** Notice that the context is primarily concerned, not so much with the doctrine of adoption, but with our new birth – the doctrine of regeneration (cf. 2:29; 3:9). This is the idea that in salvation a person is born again. He/she is changed inwardly into a new creation.
 - ▶ The gifts of adoption and regeneration are closely related yet distinct. **In adoption, God gives his enemies a new name**, which concerns our *status* before God. **But in regeneration, God gives his enemies a new *nature*.** Beyond our legal status, he actually changes us into new persons to match our new name.

- ❖ Notice how, in **v1**, John adds that phrase, “*and so we are.*” In case anyone thinks our adoption is only a legal fiction, that we are children of God in name only – John emphatically adds, “*and so we are.*” We are his children in status and in nature.
 - ▶ There are some orphans who have been told they’re adopted, that the family has signed the paperwork, but they’re still waiting in a rundown orphanage, wearing raggedy clothes, with no knowledge of the love and warmth found in a real family. That’s not us. Christians are adopted children who are living with our new family, in our new home, wearing new clothes, and sitting at the table with our new Father.

- ❖ And our Father has gone so far as to impart something of himself in each of us. John calls it ‘*God’s seed*’ in **3:9**. **It is this something of God that begins to changes us from the inside out so that we begin to take on the family resemblance.** We begin to do what is right because our Father is righteous. Read **2:29** again, “*If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.*”
 - ▶ This goes back to the point I made earlier: **Those who have been born of God will naturally resemble him.** If God is righteous, then his children will resemble his righteousness.
 - John is so bold as to say in **v9** that “*No one born of God makes a practice of sinning*”. He’s saying the children of God will so resemble their Father in righteousness that they will not keep on sinning. That’s a remarkable verse! Now unpacking it will require a sermon in itself, so I’ll save it for next week.

- ❖ The point is this: **You can recognize the children of God in the same way you recognize the children in our congregation.** You look for family resemblance. If you step into our nursery or children’s ministry for the first time, you may not know any of the kids, but if you look at them close enough, you’ll be able to match these kids with their parents. You’ll notice the same face or mannerisms. There’s something about them that resembles Mom or Dad.
 - ▶ Of course the resemblance won’t be perfect. And the same goes for a Christian. **You won’t meet a Christian who is going to perfectly resemble the Father.** But that’s to be expected, especially if we’re talking about a very young or immature believer.

- ❖ Think about it. *Have you ever seen a newborn?* Like new-born, a day or two old. Let’s be honest, they look kind of alien. A newborn starts off looking like no one in the family. But in time, as they mature, the family resemblance starts to set in.
 - ▶ The same goes for spiritual infants. **In the beginning, you may look nothing like the Father, but as you grow, the likeness will certainly set in.** But if years have gone by and your resemblance to the Father is still faint at best, then something is wrong. Babies don’t stay babies forever. All infants grow up, including spiritual ones.

- ❖ So if you’re not growing at all, if you’re not looking more like the Father, then perhaps it’s time to test yourself to see if you are truly in the faith. **We must never presume to be in the family of God just because we’re sitting in the congregation of God.** *Are you a child of God?* John wrote to help you know, to help you recognize one.

Strangers in an Alien Land

- ❖ And he's described them as objects of an alien love, and now 2) God's children are strangers in an alien land. Let's read the last part of v1, "*The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.*" So after emphatically stating that Christians are the children of God, John quickly acknowledges that the rest of the world is blind to this reality.

God's children are not of this world

- ❖ As a Christian, you're a stranger in an alien land. **God's children are not of this world.** Like the saints of old, we are "*strangers and exiles on the earth*" (Heb. 11:13). Jesus, speaking of his disciples, said, "*they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.*" (Jn. 17:14)
 - ▶ So if you are his disciple, then this world is not your home. You have to come to grips with that. Now we should point out that when John uses the term *world*, he's not talking about our blue planet in a physical sense but about our fallen world in a moral sense. It's the same *world* that hates Christians, as he says in chapter 3:13.

God's children are strangers to the world

- ❖ This is the fallen, unbelieving world in which we live. It's an alien land. **And God's children are strangers in it.** When John says the world "*does not know us*", he means the world doesn't recognize our true identity as God's children. We're misunderstood.
 - ▶ **When the world imagines a child of God, they picture a superhuman, an otherworldly being.** When the Greeks imagined a child of God they came up with Hercules or Perseus, both sons of Zeus. They were exceptional men. They accomplished spectacular feats. They fit the world's expectations of a child of God.
- ❖ But when the world looks at Christians, who claim to be the true children of God, they laugh. They don't see many who are wise by human standards, many who are influential, or many of noble birth (1 Cor. 1:26). They don't see otherworldly heroes. They see ordinary folk.
 - ▶ **The world is looking for Herculean figures, but all they see are jars of clay like us.** So yes, you're a child of God. It's an awesome privilege! But don't expect to have the world's recognition or respect. To them, you're a stranger.
- ❖ **I think many Christians have a hard time embracing the identity of a stranger.** We don't like to stand out. We don't want to be misunderstood. We want to be respected. And so there's a strong pull to live and talk and act like the world. The message we often give off is, "*Look, we Christians aren't that strange. We watch the same shows, listen to the same music, read the same blogs, wear the same clothes. We spend our money and our spare time in the same way. We're no different in chasing after love and relationships, fame and achievement, power and influence. We're just like you!*"
 - ▶ But John is saying that if the world actually understood you and accepted and respected your lifestyle, then you should wonder if you really are a child of God. **If the world gets you fully, if your life and life choices make total sense to them, then you ought to stop and wonder: *Am I really a child of God?***

- ❖ Because, for John, it was a given that a child of God would not be recognized by the world. And notice his reason why, “*The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.*” So don’t take it personal. **The world doesn’t get you is because the world doesn’t get your Father.**
 - ▶ And that’s okay because the goal was never for the world to get you. The Christian objective is not to gain the world’s recognition. **No, our objective is to introduce the world to our Father and his Son Jesus.** The goal is not for our unbelieving family and friends or our non-Christians classmates and co-workers to get us. The goal is for them to get God. And only when they come to know our Father will they recognize us for who we are. Only then will we no longer be strangers.
 - *But until then, are you willing to embrace the identity of a stranger in this foreign, alien land?*

Reflections of an Alien Likeness

- ❖ So let’s review: The children of God are 1) Objects of an alien love and 2) Strangers in an alien land, and 3) Reflections of an alien likeness.

Right now we are not yet what we will be

- ❖ Now we just said that the reason the world fails to recognize Christians as children of God is owing to their ignorance of our Father. But I’m not surprised if the world has a hard time believing that we’re children of God considering how selfish or prideful we can be.
- ❖ But whenever Christians are challenged about that, we often shoot back with catchy slogans like “*Christians aren’t perfect just forgiven.*” And, yes, there is truth in that. But I think the world is right to expect much from the children of God – much more than we show.
 - ▶ **But what the world doesn’t understand is that though we are *already* the children of God (in status and nature), we have *not yet* achieved full resemblance to God.** Right now we are not yet what we will be. John says it this way in **v2**, “*Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared*”.
- ❖ Notice that key word *now*. “We are God’s children *now*”. Well judging by appearances, we don’t look the part. We’re still frail in body and mind, vulnerable to sickness and suffering. We still struggle with sin and temptation.
 - ▶ But in spite of appearances, John is reinforcing the reality of our adoption and new birth in Christ. We are his children *now*, and what we will be has not yet appeared.
- ❖ ***Can you imagine what we’re going to look like in glory?*** I can’t. I can’t fathom what it looks like to never have an impure thought again, or what it’s like to have 100% selfless motives. I can’t imagine what it’s like to never tire, to never age, to never get sick.
 - ▶ We can speculate all we want about what heaven will be like, but in the end, we don’t know. What we will be has not yet appeared.

One day we will be transformed into His likeness

- ❖ **But John says there is one thing we do know.** He says, “*But we know that when he (Jesus) appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*”
 - ▶ So although we don’t know what we will look like or what it will be like, the one thing we do know is that when Christ comes back, we shall see him as he is. Scripture says that “*in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye*” we will be changed (1 Cor. 15:52).
 - **On that day we will be transformed into His likeness.** I call it an alien likeness because it is so foreign to what we are now. We're talking about becoming just like Jesus. Just think about how wild that is!

- ❖ Now this idea of seeing Jesus “*as he is*” is pretty amazing. Remember, John was one of the twelve disciples. He says in chapter 1:1 that he saw Jesus with his own eyes. John even saw Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. But even he has yet to see Jesus in this way.
 - ▶ Even John has yet to see Jesus “*as he is*” – to see Jesus in his unshielded, heavenly glory, to see in such a way that the very sight is enough to transform you into his likeness (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12, 15:51-52; 2 Cor. 3:18). But this is a vision that all of God’s children will share in.

- ❖ I love how John says “*we know*” this is going to happen. *We know* that our full resemblance to Christ will be completed. *We know* one day we will receive our full inheritance as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17).
 - ▶ But not yet. Right now the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed (Rom. 8:20). Right now we groan inwardly waiting for the full redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:23). **But one day we will be changed to be like Christ so we can spend eternity with Christ enjoying Him forever.**

Today we prepare for what we will be

- ❖ Brothers and Sisters, if this is our confidence, if this is the future we have to look forward to, then **today, and every day after, should be spent in preparation for what we will be.** There's preparation involved. Yes, that final transformation won't happen until that day we see Jesus as he is, but until that day we don't just sit on our hands. No, we prepare.
 - ▶ That's what John says in **v3**, “*And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.*” Those who have in them the hope of being changed into the pure likeness of Christ will express this future hope in a commitment to being pure like Christ in the present. We prepare for what we will become.

- ❖ ***If you are child of God and if what you will be has not appeared, then how are you preparing yourself today for what you will one day become?***
 - ▶ What is one thing in your life that needs to change this week that will help you more resemble your Heavenly Father? That one thing you need to stop doing or start doing. Because of who you are and what you'll become, Christian, as yourself: *What do you need to do to prepare?*