**“A New You”**

**The Gospel Series, No. 8**

**1 John 3:1-3**

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**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

In this part of our series of sermons on the Gospel, the good news, we are defining the good news: precisely what is the news that Christians are proclaiming to the world as glad tidings. *What* events, *what* discoveries, *what* possibilities are worthy to be trumpeted to the four corners of the earth? Remember, we said that “good news” is one of the most distinctive features of our Christian faith. We have something extraordinary to tell others. No other religion or philosophy could be or is described in this way, as *wonderful news you need to hear*! So far we have said that the good news is that God himself came into the world as a man to deliver us – *the incarnation* – and, because divine justice required it, Jesus Christ, the God/Man died in our place to pay the penalty for our sins and free us from ourselves – *the cross* – and that he rose again from the dead, having triumphed over sin and death on our behalf – *the resurrection*. The appearance of the God/Man, his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead: this is emphatically the good news! It dramatically alters the human situation and holds promise of the most wonderful things for every person on the face of the earth! But there is more to this story. There is, in this gospel also the prospect of the transformation and the perfection of human life. This is the true *telos*, the end point, the purpose of everything we have considered so far. Human beings can become everything every human being knows he or she *ought to be*!

**Text Comment**

3:1 In most cases where the NIV and the ESV differ in translation it is my experience that the ESV is to be preferred. That is the primary reason we switched Bibles some time ago here at Faith Presbyterian Church. But here is an instance in which the NIV is, I think, superior. It reads “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.” The ESV is more prosaic. “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.” Now there is no verb “lavish” in v. 1. It is, in fact, the word “give.” It is the adjective translated “what kind of” in the ESV that is the issue. It certainly means “what kind of,” but if you consult the standard lexicons or dictionaries of NT Greek you will read that the context sometimes requires a translation such as “how great,” “how wonderful,” or “how glorious.” [*BAG*, 701]This is clearly such a context. That’s where the NIV’s “lavish” comes from, the adjective not the verb. John is obviously saying that it is a stupendous thing that we should be called God’s own children and the translation in the NIV reflects that sense of wonderbetter than does the rather colorless translation of the ESV.

In 1984, when our daughter Bryonie was four years of age, our family, there were five of us then not the seven we would eventually become, spent half a year in the Netherlands. And during those months we paid a short visit to Scotland, and to Aberdeen, where Florence and I had spent three very happy and fruitful years when I was doing graduate work at the University there. We planned our trip so that we could be in Aberdeen over a Lord’s Day and attend the church where we had worshipped for those three years and which had so warmly welcomed us into its fellowship. The pastor during our time in Aberdeen, William Still, was still the pastor of the congregation. He was in his seventies then, but still hale and hearty. He had never seen any of our children and, with the great respect that I had for Mr. Still, it was an honor for me to introduce them to him. I can see the scene in the back of the church as if it were yesterday. He stooped down, that bald-headed old man – a great man and a great minister of the Word – and he took Bryonie’s head in his hands, stared intently into her eyes, and studied her features. “Aye. I can see your daddy there. Can I see your mummy? Yes, I must be able to see your mummy too; what a bonnie lass!”

It is this fact of family resemblance that John trades on in these beautiful verses. As it is true in physical appearance that children resemble their parents, so it is true in spiritual appearance. That is, in the moral quality or character of a person’s life he or she will also often resemble the parent. It isn’t always so, of course, but it serves to make John’s point. And in the spiritual realm it is more true than it is in the physical where sometimes children don’t resemble their parents at all. Sooner or later, everyone will display the characteristics of his or her parent. Jesus, remember, in John 8 said that the Devil was the true and ultimate father of unbelievers. In this world, but especially in the world to come, the Devil’s children will prove the old adage that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. They will then be more like their father than now they may appear to be. But John’s point is that this family resemblance is supremely true for Christians, who have God for their Father and Jesus for their elder brother. *There is, there will be a family resemblance*.

John makes the point more explicitly in v. 2. When our salvation is complete, when we are finally in heaven, John says, we will be very like the Lord Jesus Christ. The very act of opening our eyes on the exalted Lord Jesus, our elder brother, the very fact that we will be enveloped by the glory of God our Father, will complete the process of our transformation. And when it is done we shall belong to God’s family and bear his resemblance perfectly and in every way. We will be as much like God as we are capable of becoming. In this world Christians come to resemble our heavenly Father and our elder brother only to some degree, but one day that process will be complete and you and I and every believer in Jesus Christ will have been completely transformed after the image and likeness of God. That is what the Bible says many times and in many ways.

In Romans 8:19-20, for example, Paul writes:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for *the revealing of the sons of God*.”

J.B. Phillips, whose translation of the New Testament was full of arresting and memorable renderings, making the text come alive for 20th century readers, rendered that final sentence: Even now the creation “stands on tiptoe” waiting to see the children of God “come into their own.” That’s it: we will come into our own! And what is our own: a life like God’s own life for purity, goodness, and love.

As I said, throughout the Bible it is moral and spiritual transformation of human life that is said to have always been the true *telos* or ultimate purpose of the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it in Titus 2:13: “…our great God and Savior Jesus Christ…gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people *for his own possession* who are *zealous for good works.”* And in Colossians 3: “…you have put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

That is, we are in this world beginning to become more like God, a process that will be finished all at once and dramatically in the next!

The fact is, if you take the Bible’s teaching as a whole, and, all the more the exposition of salvation that we are given in the New Testament, it is this moral and spiritual transformation that is the far greater emphasis. We are to rejoice, absolutely, in the forgiveness of our sins, in our peace with God, in our deliverance from punishment. And believers in Jesus Christ are taught so to rejoice. *But it is a standing temptation for human beings to want forgiveness without moral transformation*. To be freed of guilt and the fear of punishment, to have our uneasy consciences soothed is wonderful, but we can want forgiveness for entirely selfish reasons, without any real longing to be rid of the sins for which we need to be forgiven. Every human being is subject to this temptation: to be allowed to sin without penalty, without consequence. *It is perhaps the primary reason for so much false and hypocritical religious profession.*

But no such forgiveness is taught or promised in the Bible. In the Bible forgiveness is what makes it possible for God to transform our lives into something good, something pleasing to him, into what he intended human life to be when he created it in the first place. *Forgiveness is a means to an end; it is not the end itself.* God must forgive our sins so that he can begin to rid us of them and replace them in our heart and life with worthy thoughts, words, and deeds. That is the biblical understanding of salvation. We were saved, Paul says, for good works!

And so it is that in biblical teaching about salvation the greater emphasis falls on the fact that believers’ hearts and lives are being transformed into something far, far better than they have ever been or, indeed, ever could be in this world. We have the dream of real human goodness, or moral strength, of hearts full of love and compassion. Every human being does, whether or not he or she admits this. Every human being longs for this true goodness. He or she knows only too well what ought to be in human life and, alas, what actually is instead.

Human beings admire Mother Theresa for her selfless devotion to the neediest of people. They know in their hearts that they should be more like she was. They are fascinated by and drawn to people who seem remarkably good. Some of you have read *For the Glory*, the new biography of Eric Liddell. The author, not a Christian himself so far as I can tell, was fascinated by and drawn to the famous Scot Olympic champion and missionary to China *because he was such a good man, so invariably kind, so thoughtful of others, so ready to deny himself for the sake of others.* He was a perfect hero of goodness! Why do we find such a man so interesting; why do we admire him? Because we all know we should be like him. *We wish we were like him*.

We have our glimpses of true love, of powerful love in the course of our lives. And they are regularly the most radiant experiences of our lives. Every human being who has ever had his or her heart full of love for God or for another human being understandably, rightly wishes that it were always so. When we are kind to someone else we are satisfied and fulfilled. When we are unkind or cruel we are ashamed of ourselves. We regret what we were and how we behaved. Shame itself is the debt paid to true goodness. Why in the world do people get red in the face when they have behaved badly? Because we know what we did was unworthy; we embarrass themselves.

But what great satisfaction we get from some success – losing weight or getting out of debt or repairing a broken relationship – why for goodness sake? Because what we did was *a good thing*, it was worthy of being done, and because we did it in defiance of the difficulty. We wish we had that willpower all the time. Every human being does. Why? Because willpower, strength of character is a good thing, is an honorable thing. Oh, that we were always what we are when we are at our best.

But, of course, we are not usually at our best. That is the sad story of human life. We know the good; but we do not do it. Everyone in the world knows, whether or not he or she will admit, that we fail to measure up. That is our problem: we don’t measure up. We are not as good as we know very well we ought to be. And this is true of Christians as surely as it is true of unbelievers. Indeed, *it is more true of Christians* because not only do we know the good, we have motivations and resources that unbelievers do not have. For us to fail to do the good is a greater sin because *we can do better*. As followers of Jesus Christ we have a still greater longing for a holy, pure, and loving life, we are more conscious of our calling to walk worthy of the grace we have received, and by the work of Jesus Christ for us and the work of the Holy Spirit in us, *we should, as Paul put it, by our manner of life constantly be making the truth of God attractive to others* and only sometimes do we really do this.

Now I don’t deny that real goodness, the goodness that all people know is goodness, the goodness as goodness is defined by God himself; I say I don’t deny that real goodness is found in Christian lives already in this world. As John explains here, while it remains true that what we will be has not yet appeared, it is also true, already true, that the reason the people of this world do not recognize the children of God among them is because they don’t know God themselves. They cannot see what difference the presence of God would make in one’s life. They don’t appreciate how profound is the difference between a person who knows he is a sinner saved by God’s grace and a person who will neither admit the true extent of his or her sin nor has any experience of the grace of God. They cannot tell how different a person is who wishes to be good *for God* from a person who does not and whose very idea of goodness is much less exalted. They cannot see how different is the viewpoint of someone who knows God – holy, loving, powerful, faithful to his promises – to be the foundation of everything in life.

There is already, even in this world, a great difference between the followers of Jesus Christ and everyone else. This is the reason why, through the ages, so many people have become Christians – in one respect every single person who has ever become a Christian – because of the impression made upon them by the lives of other Christians. Even the very imperfect lives of Christians in this world can tell a powerful tale! Gregory in the 3rd century became a Christian because he was so powerfully drawn to the example of Origen’s life, his interest in others, his hospitality, his integrity. In a similar way Augustine was drawn to the faith in part because of the example of Ambrose’s life. Charles Spurgeon, the greatest preacher of the 19th century, once wrote this.

“They will ask (when I have gone) what was the secret of my ministry. I will tell you. It has been two-fold: the truth of my message, and my mother’s life. She adorned the doctrine, she made it comfortable to live with. And her son found it so.” [*The Gospel According to Mother*]

Such is God’s grace that it never fails to change a life in very good ways, no matter the sin that remains. Christians must deal with our still great sin; we will have our ups and downs, our triumphs and our falls. It is the nature of the still very imperfect Christian life. But the change is still enough to impress a thoughtful, interested unbeliever. We have heard testimony to this fact many times in this church through the years; how it was that a person came to Christ in some significant part because he or she could see in observing the life of Christians that they had what he or she wished for but had not yet found.

But, if that is so, what will be the case when the change is complete, when the heart is perfectly pure, when love controls every thought, when one finds his or her joy and satisfaction in the service of God and others, when one is happy to forget oneself and can rejoice in the happiness of every other human being, when true goodness has become the controlling principle of life? *Why, we will scarcely know ourselves!* And how we will admire everyone else!Admiration is a wonderful thing. We love it when our hearts are full of admiration for someone else. And then everyone else will be someone calling forth that admiration from us.

Most people in the world, of course, have a very inadequate view of Jesus Christ. They think of him as only a very good man, which, in some ways, is strange, since people who would have thought of themselves as very good men, put him to death in a frenzy of jealous rage. But they know what he taught and they know how he lived. And the impression of his life comes across the ages with wonderful power. They may not believe the incarnate God, they may not believe that they must worship him and obey him. They may have little idea of what it was that he came into the world to do. They may not believe that his death on the cross is their only hope of peace with God. *But they still believe he was a very good man*. They can’t help themselves. You very rarely hear anyone, even among unbelievers, who would dare to say that Jesus Christ was a bad man. But why do they think him so good? Because he lived for others, because he was faithful to his principles, because his integrity was such that he would rather die than violate his own conscience, and because he so obviously cared for people, especially for the people that other people of his time did not care for.

In other words, without perhaps recognizing what they are doing, they admit that there is such a thing as a truly good human life. And they admire such a life. Even after 2,000 years they admire it! And if they were honest they would admit that they wish they lived such a life, that they were as good as that, that they lived such a life that others would admire for all the right reasons. *True goodness draws people to itself.* And this is the witness that human experience bears to the truth of what we have read in these few verses from 1 John 3. There is true human goodness in this world; we know it when we see it; it is beautiful; it is what ought to be true of human beings. And it is this goodness that we long for, this goodness that we have had glimpses of in this world – in our own lives and in the lives of others –, I say, it is this goodness that is proclaimed as a sure and certain hope in the gospel, in the good news.

How do we know that *this* is the future of all who trust in, who love, and who follow Jesus Christ: this life of perfect goodness and love? Because this is what Christ came into the world to do, to break the grip of sin and selfishness on the human heart; because his resurrection from the dead to new, perfect, and eternal life is the guarantee of our resurrection *to the same life*. Because God has made us his own children and we are being remade in the image of our heavenly Father. And because this is what the God who cannot lie has promised us times without number in his Word.

Jesus Christ did not come into the world and die on the cross primarily so that we would not have to worry about being punished for our sins. He came, as he himself said, that we might have life and have it to the full! And as everyone knows, *everyone*, at least deep in his or her heart, there can be no human life that is “life to the full,” that is not a life of true goodness, a life of love, a life lived for others, a life of purity, honesty, and high purpose.

*Justification* is one of the Bible’s terms for the forgiveness of sins. Sanctification is one of the Bible’s terms for the transformation of life – along with the new birth, the new creation, and so on. Christians tend to think first and foremost about justification, about forgiveness. But Robert Murray McCheyne, the Scottish pastor who died at 29 years of age and who was famous in his own time for the goodness of his life, I say McCheyne got it right when he said that sanctification was “the better half of salvation.” Perhaps his life was as good as it was because he saw so clearly in a way that we often do notthat *this* is what Christ is after in our lives! The Lord did not die to let sinners remain sinners; he died to make us good. He died to turn us into what human beings should be. He died to make possible the life that every human being knows full well he or she ought to live.

Do you want to know why there is so much suffering in life? Why life is so difficult and so disappointing in many ways? Because God is after something we regularly do not think is nearly as important as he does. He is after our transformation into people who will be like himself. Only in that way can we become the people we were meant to be and only in that way can we enjoy both true fellowship with God and true fellowship with one another. *Suffering is the crucible of true goodness!* And sinful as we are, it takes a lot to batter us into shape. Indeed, much as it costs to make us *somewhat better* in this world, it will take death and resurrection to complete the job. But *this* and this only is what God is after in human beings and so this is what Christ was after when he came into the world, died on the cross, and rose again.

He went to the cross, the Bible says, for the joy that was set before him. How could he face the terror and agony of the cross? Because he knew what it would accomplish. He could see that world of happy men and women, full of love and goodness, enjoying life to the full in fellowship with one another and in communion with God.

Have you ever seen or heard or tasted perfect goodness in your life? If you have, you remember how delicious the experience was, how moving, how delightful. And from time to time we have had just a taste of real human goodness. C.S. Lewis once wrote to his life-long friend, Arthur Greeves, about a period of several days in his life in 1930 when he seemed, perhaps for the first time, to rise above some of his prevailing temptations and sins. He remarked on what a delicious experience that was. That was his word: *delicious*. It produced, he said, an intense feeling of delight. [338] Well imagine such a delicious feeling produced by true goodness, by love and gratitude and purity all compact, but one that doesn’t flit in and out of your life, but comes with power and never leaves!

That is what Christ will give us, what he has already given multitudes now in heaven. *And what greater gift could be given to a human being than that?* Following Christ will begin to turn you into the same kind of thing as Christ himself and then, in a moment, after you leave this world, he will finish his work in you and you will be like him, at least as much like him as a mere human being can become, because you will see him as he is. This is the very best possible news: in Christ you will become the perfect version of yourself.