

“Children of the Devil”
John 8:37-47
February 2, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pr. Nicoletti

We continue in the Gospel of John this morning, coming now to John 8:37-47, where Jesus continues his conversation with the Jews gathered in the temple in Jerusalem at the Feast of Booths.

As we pointed out last Lord’s Day, in John 8 Jesus addresses four major threats to the People of God. First, he addresses the darkness and deceptions of this world. Second, he speaks to the spiritual slavery that sin leads to. Third, he discusses the threat of the devil. And fourth he comes to the topic of death. The world, sin, the devil, and death.

This morning we come to the third of those four threats: The devil.

With that in mind we turn now to John 8:37-47.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{8:37} [Jesus said to them,] “I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

³⁹ They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹ You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father – even God.” ⁴² Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, be gracious to us, your servants,
that we may live and keep your word.
Open our eyes, that we may behold
wondrous things out of your word.
Let your testimonies be our delight,

and our chief counselors.

We ask this in Jesus's name. Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:17-18, 24]

Our text this morning is about the question of spiritual fathers.

Which means that to some extent, reflecting on human fathers and mothers, and how they shape their children, will be a good place for us to start.

And parents shape their children both through nature and through nurture – both through genetics and through socialization.

Of course biological descent – that genetic connection in the case of biological parents and their biological children – is a major way that parents often shape their children. And by that genetic connection we pass on all sorts of physical, mental, and personality traits. And we get no choice over which ones we will pass on ... and as they grow up, we see more of their personality, and it becomes increasingly clear that they have received much from us through that biological component.

That said, genetics is not the only way that parents shape their children. Children are also shaped by the way their parents raise them. As they grow up, you can begin to notice your children adopting your mannerisms. Or your facial expressions. Or using the terms or speech patterns that you use. Sometimes you even hear them repeating your exact words to someone else, as if they were their own.

Just recently I noticed one of my daughter's tendencies to blurt out "Come on!" whenever she gets frustrated. And I thought it an odd thing to say, and I wondered where she picked it up ... and then a few minutes later, I got frustrated with something, and suddenly heard myself blurting out "Come on!" And I realized where she got it from.

Parents shape their children, whether they try to or not – whether for good or for ill. Those of us who are parents see it in a range of ways. And all of us who *were* children know it in even more ways. We all remember things our parents said or did that shaped us – either in a good way ... or in a not so good way. Parents shape their children not just by the genetic traits they pass on, but by the traits they nurture in their children as they grow.

And it's that second aspect – of shaping through nurture and relationship – that our text is focused on this morning.

This emphasis comes out in a number of ways. We see it when Jesus talks about whether the Jewish crowd gathered in the temple are descendants of Abraham. In verse thirty-seven he says that he knows that they are descendants of Abraham. But in verse thirty-nine he says that they are not children of Abraham. And why? Because, he says, they do not do the works that Abraham did. They may have Abraham's genes ... but they have not been socialized into his pattern of life.

He says the same thing then about their relationship to the devil. Jesus's argument about the crowd having Satan as their father is not one of origin, but of who has shaped them like a father. He says that they are children of the devil because they do what he does and say what he says – because they have been nurtured and socialized by him.

Even when Jesus speaks of who his own Father is, he speaks not of his origin here – though he could have – but of whose pattern of life he observes and follows.

The question that keeps coming up in our text is who each person's spiritual Father is. And the focus of that spiritual Fatherhood is not on generation – not in one's source or origin or ancestry. The focus is on who has nurtured you – who has shaped you – whose pattern of life you follow.

Both nature and nurture make us who we are – but our text this morning especially focuses on the nurture side of parenthood.

And because the focus is on nurture – on shaping – the picture that emerges here is that there are two different spiritual fathers, and each is seeking spiritual children. Each is seeking to play the shaping and socializing role of a father to those who follow him.

And those two spiritual fathers are God and the devil. Both God and the devil seek children. That is the reality at the heart of our text this morning.

And as we look closer what we see is that each seeks children who might receive his word, imitate his actions, and ultimately share his nature.

God and the devil each seek spiritual children who would receive his word, imitate his actions, and share his nature – his character.

This morning we are going to consider what that looks like for each of them, and what it means for us.

So, the first thing we see is that the devil seeks children for himself.

The devil seeks children for himself.

And we're going to consider *how* he does that, but before we even get there we need to ask: *Whom* does he seek? *Whom* does the devil seek to be his children?

And the answer is that he seeks *you*. He seeks *you*.

And we need to break down what that means a bit. And the best way to approach that might be to separate what that means for a non-Christian, and what it means for a Christian.

Let's start with the non-Christian.

For most non-Christians in our society, this whole topic would seem ridiculous. You would likely find yourself baffled to hear a grown man stand before you and talking about the devil as if he was a real conscious spiritual being.

But the response to that, I think, is to ask: Honestly, is it really that hard to believe? If there is a spiritual reality to this world ... then isn't it in fact fairly plausible? If the spiritual realm exists – if there is a God, if human beings have immaterial souls – then it shouldn't be all that hard to believe that there are also other purely spiritual beings besides God. Purely physical things – like rocks and dirt – exist. So why not purely spiritual beings?

And if purely spiritual beings exist, why is it so hard to believe that some of them would choose the path of evil – of rebellion against their Maker. Many humans do evil things – they murder and abuse and degrade and spread hate. Why would it be impossible to believe that a spiritual being would choose a similar path?

And after all, look at the world we live in. People all around the world disagree in many ways about the nature of the universe and of human life. But one thing almost everyone would seem to agree on is that this world is broken – it is not the way it's supposed to be. Many of us believe that a supreme spiritual being is at work for good – but if the world is the way it is, why would it be so hard to believe that there is also a spiritual being at work for evil? *That* would seem to be a logical conclusion to come to, given the state of things.

And if that is the case – if the existence of Satan – a spiritual being at work to oppose the intentions of God – if his existence seems to fit logically with the world we see around us ... and yet so many in our culture disbelieve in such a being – it lends some credibility to the comment by Charles Baudelaire that “the cleverest ruse of the Devil is to persuade you he does not exist!”

The devil, and the demons who follow him, are spiritual beings made by God – angels – who have rebelled against God their Maker ... who have chosen to oppose God ... who hate God ... who have dedicated themselves to battling against God.

In our culture today we associate the devil and demons with horror movies and television shows about the uncanny. But what is striking about this passage is how ordinary it is. Jesus sees no fantastical activities on which he bases the claim that those around him are children of the devil. What he sees are ordinary looking people.

But what we see in most of the Bible is that what the devil and his demons do usually looks quite ordinary to us. In the Gospels and the Book of Acts we see demonic activity out in the open and in striking ways. But for most of the rest of Biblical history, Satan is at work in trying to shape human beings to believe what he believes, to do what he does, and to desire what he desires. Satan and the fallen angels who follow him are usually seen working to shape hearts and minds – to make children that resemble Satan himself.

Which means that their primary goal is not the wild antics of a horror movie ... their primary goal is to get ordinary people ... like *you* ... to oppose God as they do.

If you are a non-Christian, Satan seeks *you*.

But along with that, if you're a Christian, then Satan seeks you as well. In fact, in some ways, he *especially* seeks you out, the more seriously you seek God.

This is something we far too often miss, but which Christians in the early church talked about.

Christians in the early church tended to take the existence of the devil and his demons a lot more seriously than we do today – living as we do in a secular age. You especially get this in the Desert Fathers, like Evagrius in the fourth century, and John Cassian in the fifth. We would not agree with everything these men say, but they can still correct some of our blind spots.

As John Cassian and Evagrius wrote about the Christian life, they took for granted that in addition to the temptations of the world around us, and the sinful nature of our own flesh, there are also spiritual beings that try to tempt us away from God. And in fact, they believed that the more progress we make in striving against the world and our own sinful nature, the more attention we can expect from demonic tempters.

Evagrius tells his readers that when we are surrounded by people who tempt us, the devil need not exert much energy on us. But when we are free from being tempted by the people around us, we should expect to receive more attention from the spiritual forces that oppose God. In other words, as we free ourselves from the temptations of the world, the devil and his followers will be even more intentional in their temptations of us – and *their* temptations are much more difficult to overcome than the temptations that the world brings. [Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 5]

John Cassian adds to this that as we learn self-control and have more victory over the sin that dwells within us – the enslaving sin in our hearts that we considered last Sunday – in that case too we can expect the powers of Satan to come after us *more* vigorously with temptations – not less vigorously. [Cassian, V.XIX.1-2]

And this is consistent with what we see in the Bible. Of course we have passing references to the devil tempting a number of people – some of whom stand and some of whom fall. But it's worth noting what the most detailed accounts are in the Bible in which Satan tempts someone in a focused way. In other words, it is worth noting who the Bible portrays as getting extra attention from the devil in the realm of temptation.

And what we see is that it's Adam and Eve in Genesis three, Job in the Book of Job, and Jesus in the desert temptations described in the synoptic Gospels.

The most focused temptations by Satan described by the Bible are: of Adam and Eve, when they are still living in perfect righteousness; of Job, when he was so faithful and righteous that God himself boasts to Satan about him; and of Jesus, who is the sinless Lamb of God.

Satan seeks unbelievers to be his children – he seeks the wicked, he seeks the weak, the seeks the deceived – that is all true.

But Satan also seeks – and maybe even more vigorously seeks – the righteous, that he might make *them* his children.

And so, wherever you are on that spectrum – Christian or non-Christian, struggling Christian or mature Christian – wherever you are, Satan seeks *you* to be his spiritual child. And you will never outgrow that in this life. If anything, the more you grow spiritually, the more intensely he will seek to pull you to himself.

Whom does the devil seek for his children? He seeks you.

And what kind of children does the devil seek? In our passage we see that he seeks children who will receive his lies, who will follow his murderous actions, and who will share his nature – his character.

The devil seeks children who will receive his lies, follow his actions, and share his character.

Let's consider each of those.

First of all, the devil seeks children who will receive his lies – who will receive his word.

We see that in verses forty-four and forty-five. There we read that Jesus says to the crowd that the devil “does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him,” and so when the devil lies, he speaks out of his own character, because he is a liar and the father of lies.

Jesus says that the crowd will not receive his words of truth. And the reason they will not is because they have already received a lie. And that lie, came from Satan – who at his core is a liar. The devil seeks children who will receive his lies.

And the lies of Satan all revolve around the central lie he tells, which is that the God of the Bible is not good. And Satan has been telling that lie from the beginning.

He told it in Genesis three, when he said to Adam and Eve that God was keeping from them what was best – that God did not really have their best interests in mind – that God was not good.

And he has done it again and again since then. For non-Christians we see it in the form of false religion. For Christians, we see it through cultivating resistance to God or suspicion of God.

We read again and again in the Bible that when people worship gods other than the God of the Christian Scriptures, they don't worship the *true* God, they don't actually worship other gods that actually exist, but in fact, they are worshipping demons. [Lev 17:7, Deut 32:17, Ps 106:37, 1 Cor 10:20; 1 Tim 4:1, Rev 9:20] In other words, the forces of the devil are behind all false religion.

Now, in our culture today this sounds remarkably intolerant. And it would be intolerant ... if sin and the devil didn't exist. If various religions were really just the virtuous attempts of people to seek God in good-faith, then speaking ill of that would be an uncaring thing to do.

But the Bible tells us that that's not what non-Christian religion is. Because humans have rebelled against the true God, and demons want to keep them in that rebellion.

Humans were both made for relationship with God, and they are in rebellion against God. Which divides them. They long for something they also reject – the true God.

And so, the Bible tells us, the devil comes in and offers fallen humans alternatives – false gods who are enough like the true God that humans can try to satisfy their desire for God by worshipping them, but different enough from the true God that hearts in rebellion against the true God can be comfortable with them.

And so, at the root of every false religion is a lie about who God is.

And it is that same lie that the crowd in our text has accepted. They believe in God ... but not the God who is Jesus's Father. They cannot accept the God that Jesus is talking about. Which means that the crowd there believes in a god ... but it is not the true God. It is not actually the God of Abraham – the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. They have accepted the lie of the devil and embraced a picture of God that does not line up with the reality. They have willingly embraced a counterfeit god.

This is how the lie of the devil works in false religions.

But the devil presses his lies on Christians as well. And this lie takes the form of resistance or resentment towards God. The Bible warns us about this in a number of places. The lie that the devil wanted Job to receive was that God is not good. The lie that the devil presented to Jesus was the same.

We see the devil at work among Jesus's disciples in his earthly ministry, pushing them to resist what Jesus told them about the cross he must endure – pushing them to resist the ways of God. [Mark 8]

The Apostle Paul even reminds us that the devil will disguise himself as an angel of light to draw God's people away. [2 Cor 11:14]

The devil and his demons seek to deceive us. And those devils are good at what they do. They will present their lies in the form that we are most likely to accept. And so, if you are especially concerned with the immorality of the world around us, then the agents of the devil around you are most likely to tempt you to graceless legalism and a cloistered separatism. On the other hand, if you are most concerned with missions and cultural engagement, then the devil is more likely to tempt you with downplaying the law of God, and compromising with God's enemies.

Like a good social media algorithm, the devil and his forces are highly skilled at presenting you with *just* the kind of untruth that you are most likely to believe. And with this, they seek to draw you to themselves, and away from God.

And so stop for a moment ... and ask yourself what lies you might be especially vulnerable to. How might the devil tempt you to embrace his deceptions and half-truths?

The first thing we see is that the devil seeks children who will receive his lies.

The second thing we see is that the devil seeks children who will follow his actions. And his actions are to oppose God and destroy everything and anything that points to God.

The devil hates God and wants to destroy God – he longs to murder God, if it were possible. Which is why, we are told in our text, the crowd, who are the devil's children, also seek to murder Jesus.

And along with that, Satan also wants to destroy anything that points to God. He wants to bring death to humanity, as he did with Adam and Eve, because human beings bear the image of God. He wants to tempt people to unfaithfulness through adultery, we read in 1 Corinthians 7, because faithfulness points to the character of God. He wants to eliminate forgiveness from how God's people deal with a sinner, as we read in 2 Corinthians 2, because forgiveness points to the heart of God. He wants to tempt Christians to renounce their loyalty to Christ when it begins to cost them, as we read, he tempted Peter in Luke 22, because he hates the loving and loyal relationship between Christ and his people.

How then, might he be seeking to do that in your life? Where is Satan trying to tarnish or obscure the image of God in your heart, or your life, or your relationships?

Satan delights in fighting against God – in trying to mar and disfigure the image of God in and around us.

The second thing we see is that the devil seeks children so that they might follow in his actions.

Third, the devil seeks children so that they might share in his nature – in his character.

We see this in verse forty-four. Jesus says that the crowd's father is the devil, because their will is to do the devil's desires. In other words, the devil's desires are their desires.

This is, in many ways, the culmination of how parents shape their children through nurture – isn't it? That shaping, in its full sense, is not only cognitive, in truth claims believed; it is not only behavioral, in actions imitated; but it all comes together when it becomes a matter of the heart – when a child's desires line up with their parents' desires. And that is what Jesus says has happened between this crowd and the devil. Their desires now match their spiritual father's desires.

The culmination of all of this is that the devil's children reject God as he is ... because they hate him, just as the devil does. This is Satan's goal in all false religion: that we would love a false picture of God so much that we would hate the true picture of God. It is Satan's goal in fostering resistance and resentment among God's people: that resistance would turn to rebellion and resentment would turn to hate. This is Satan's goal in tempting us to delight in desecrating God's image in this world: that we would come to hate the image and hate God himself. The culmination of the devil's work is that his children hate God just as he does.

What is key in that fact is recognizing that there is a destination to those temptations, those tendencies. The end game is not just one sin. The end game is not just a handful of false beliefs about God. The devil's end game is that you would be like him, and so hate the true God – the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ – the God who is revealed in the Christian Scriptures.

The devil seeks children. And he seeks *you* to be one of his children. And the kind of children he seeks are those who will receive his lies, who will follow his actions, and who will in the end, share his nature – his hatred of the true God.

This is what we see in our text. This, Jesus says, is what the crowd has already fallen victim to. This, we see, is what threatens us.

What then is our hope?

Well, to begin, we need to locate where to find our hope.

C.S. Lewis, in the preface to his book *The Screwtape Letters*, wrote “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hale a materialist or a magician with the same delight.” [Lewis, 15]

As we have already discussed, our text pushes against the tendency in our secular society to deny or ignore the demonic realm and their works.

But at the same time, our text does *not* push us to hyper focus on the demonic. Jesus does not offer techniques or an extended lesson on demonology. He instead, after unmasking the threat of becoming like the devil, directs us to the other father who is seeking spiritual children – he directs our attention to God. Because our hope lies in God’s care of us.

For God too is seeking spiritual children. And he too seeks children so that they might receive his word, imitate his actions, and share his nature.

Our hope, we will see, is not in some uncanny battle with the devil – but in resisting the devil’s nurture, while receiving and pursuing nurture from God instead.

Let us consider what God’s shaping and nurturing work looks like, then.

First, as before, we need to pause and consider again *whom* it is that God seeks as his children. And the key answer, once more, is that *he also* seeks *you*.

And that is true whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian.

If you are a Christian, you are here only because God sought *you* first. *You* personally. *You* as an individual. We are good Calvinists here at Faith, and so we believe that on paper. But we struggle, I think, like most Calvinists do, to believe it in practice – to believe it at a heart level.

If you have placed your trust in Christ, it is because God first sought you. Out of no merit of your own, he decided to draw you to himself. And he enabled you to respond and to cling to him in faith. He wants *you* – and his love for you personally should motivate your love for him. The fact that he *wants* you to be his child should fuel your desire to relate to him as your Father. At the heart of the gospel is that God is making for himself a family, and he draws all believers in as his children.

If you are a Christian, then it is because God sought *you* long before you sought him.

And if you are not yet a Christian, but you are here, and you sense the pull of God’s word, then God is seeking you too. In one sense the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 2 that God desires *all* to be saved – *all* to come to the knowledge of the truth – *all* to become his children.

In another sense, his calling to an individual becomes clear as they sense his drawing them close – his effectual call in their hearts.

God seeks children. And he is seeking you.

And as he does, God seeks children so that they might receive his word, follow his loving actions, and share in his nature.

Let’s consider each of those.

First, God seeks children so that they might receive his word of truth. And we know this is central to God’s nurture of his children in part because it comes up again and again in this short text.

Take a look: In verse thirty-seven Jesus says that the root problem for the crowd is that *his word* finds no place in them. In verse forty-three he says that the crowd's lack of understanding is rooted in the fact that they cannot bear *his word*. And what is the word that Jesus spoke to them? In verse thirty-eight he says that his word is what he *saw* from God the Father. In verse forty he adds that his word is what he *heard* from God the Father. Then finally, in verse forty-seven Jesus states again the central issue that "Whoever is of God hears the words of God."

Central to God's shaping and nurturing of his children is the Word of God. For the first-century Jews in this text that especially meant the Hebrew Scriptures and the words spoken by Christ. For us, it means the entirety of Scripture. At the root of how God shapes his children to be like him is their reception of his Word.

That is why we stress the Scriptures here as we do. It's why we encourage you to read the Scriptures on your own. It's why we study them further in Sunday school classes. It's why we gather twice on Sundays to hear them preached. It's why Scripture saturates our worship service: Scripture calls us to worship, Scripture shapes the words we sing together, Scripture is read to give us assurance that we are forgiven, Scripture is central to the words of institution at the Lord's Table, Scripture makes up the benediction we receive, and at the center of our service together is an extended consideration of the Scriptures in the sermon. Scripture saturates our time together because the Church of Christ is called to make disciples – to make children of God. And God shapes his children through his Word – through his Scriptures.

And if you're not attending to his Word – if you're not reading it during the week, if you're not listening to it here on the Lord's Day ... then what reason do you have to believe that you will be nurtured and shaped by your heavenly Father?

If you want to grow in your faith as a child of God, coming to and receiving his Word is essential. If want to know God as your Father, then coming to and receiving his Word is crucial.

God seeks children, that they might receive his word of truth.

Second, God seeks his children that they might imitate his loving actions. And the central loving action we are called to is loving Christ, God's Son – our Elder Brother. In verse forty-two Jesus tells the crowd that if they were of God then they would love him – they would love Jesus – because he came from God. In other words, God the Father loves Christ, and so if we walk in the Heavenly Father's footsteps, we too will love Christ. And then that love spreads out from there to loving Christ's people. And from there to loving all our neighbors, just as God does.

But central, is love for Christ. God the Father loves God the Son, and we should follow his example. And God the Son loves God the Father, and so should we. And God the Holy Spirit loves both the Father and the Son, and we should as well. And as the love of the Father and the Son go out to the Spirit, so should our love.

God seeks his children that they might imitate his loving actions. And as we do, we are taken up into the loving interactions of the Trinity which then extend out to the people of God, and to all whom God has made. As we do all this, we follow our heavenly Father's loving action.

Finally, the nurture of God culminates as we come to share in God's nature. For God seeks his children so that they might share in his nature – in his character.

And the heart of all of this, we read in verse forty-seven, is whether we are “*of God.*” Do we love what God loves? Do we hate what God hates? Do we desire what God desires? That is the destination of God’s nurturing work in our life – as he shapes us by his word and by his actions.

God seeks his children so that they might share in his nature – as he is their Father, and they are his sons and daughters.

Both God and the devil seek children that would be like them.

We’ve spoken of these two spiritual beings – of God and of the devil – in parallel ... which can give the impression that they are two equal beings – two equal forces – vying for our allegiance.

But of course, as Pastor Bonham reminded us last Sunday evening, they are not equals.

God is the all-powerful Maker of heaven and earth. The devil is just a finite creature. The end of this conflict is already known – and with it, the destiny of each family.

In his first letter, the Apostle John reminds us that Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil [1 Jn 3:8] – and destroy them he will.

For in the end, God wins. He will cast the devil out, and into the lake of sulfur and fire forever. And when he does, all of Satan’s children will follow him. For they will resemble their father – and they will go where he goes: to eternity away from God, forever. [Matt 25:42, Rev 20:10]

But God and his children will dwell together forever in a new heaven and a new earth – in a world that is overcome by joy, and peace, and love.

These are the destinations of the two families. They are opposite ends, just as they are families living in opposite ways.

Our call is to be sure that we are children of God.

And how do we do this? Not by our own strength. Not by our own words.

But simply by accepting that God truly seeks us, by receiving his gracious word, by following as he leads us, and by allowing his Spirit to make us more and more like him.

And if you do that, then as the Apostle Paul tells us, “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” [Rom 16:20]

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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