

Who are the Children of God?

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[0 : 0 0] word to us. And if you keep that open, we'll pray together for God's help as we look at it. So let's pray together. Gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you again for the privilege that we have to call you our Father through Jesus. And Father, we pray that as we have your faithful and truthful word open in front of us this evening, that therefore we would receive what it has to say. As Jesus says, whoever receives his teaching, obeys his word, holds to him, and is a child of ye. So Lord, would that be each of us this evening? Would we be ready to listen to you, our Father, as children who love you, and sons and daughters whom you have adopted into your family through faith in Jesus? We pray in his great name.

Amen. Well, researching your genealogy has become pretty big over the past few years. Maybe you've done some work on your own family tree, or someone in your family has done it for you. It's fascinating, actually, the sorts of things that you can find. My nan and my aunt did some work a couple of years ago and reached the dead end somewhere in the 1500s, a good 500 years ago or so. And I was pretty chuffed when they told us that our family is apparently descended from a Huguenot, one of the earliest reformed Protestant Christians in France. He fled across the channel for fear of his life at some point in the 16th century. So there you go. I'm sorry they didn't say that we are from Lewis, but it turns out

I do have some serious reformed credentials, if that counted for anything. Because we're aware enough to know, aren't we, that who your family is doesn't tell you everything about who you are. And we find this evening in this chapter of John's Gospel that who your family is can't tell you the most important thing about you, which is whether or not you are a child of God.

There's lots of talk in this chapter, isn't there, as we read about fathers and children. The question at the heart of this chapter is, who is our father? The Jews say, don't they, Abraham is our father? Well, Jesus says, I don't see the family likeness. And they say, well, God is our father.

[2 : 5 4] If that was true, said Jesus, then you'd recognize his son. See, Jesus isn't saying they've got their family tree wrong. He's saying being from a certain family, even this certain family of all families, the family that God took for himself when he made promises to Abraham, even that doesn't make them children of God, which leaves us with the question, who are the children of God? Who can be the children of God? That's what we're going to see as we go through this chapter this evening. But before we get there, I do want to say something very briefly about the first 11 verses of this chapter, which we won't be looking at this evening.

We don't have time to go into it fully. I made a wee video, which you can watch at home later if you want to know a bit more. But the even shorter version than the video is that most scholars would say there's not enough evidence to convince us that those verses, the story of the woman caught in adultery, are originally part of John's gospel. The earliest evidence we have of John's gospel doesn't include it. Later versions tell it in different ways, which suggests that the story written down in this form was only written down long after the Bible was finished being written.

Probably if you glance down at your Bible, if you're using a modern translation, it will tell you something like that. So while it's a great story, probably it did happen. We probably shouldn't treat it as God's inspired word. It teaches rightly, as Jesus does in other places, that we are all sinners. We all need his forgiveness and that therefore we should be slow to judge others in their sins.

But if it's not meant to be there, then it's not my place to preach those verses. Okay, I hope that's what you expect of your preachers, whether that's me or anyone, that when someone stands in the pulpit and speaks from the Bible, that it is, thus says the Lord, and not thus says Joe. And so that's why we're not spending time in those verses this evening. You can read them at home. You can find out more about that. But that's simply to explain why we're not doing that. And I'm happy to answer any questions about that afterwards.

But getting back to our question, who are the children of God? Well, we see firstly that God's children are not those who stand over Jesus as judge. If you read with me from verse 12, when, or literally again, therefore Jesus spoke to the people, he said, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. And now this is a standout verse in John's gospel, isn't it? Maybe you have it printed somewhere at home. Maybe you have it memorized, and you should have. It's wonderful. In this gospel, Jesus says, I am, lots of times, to help us understand who he is. They're called the I am sayings, and this is one of them. Jesus says, I am the light of the world. And he had a great sermon illustration that I will just have to describe to you in words. Remember, Jesus is still at the festival, at the Feast of [6 : 37] Tabernacles. And at the high point of that festival, a great massive fire was lit in the temple. I'm definitely not going to do that. But it was there because the Feast of Tabernacles was about the people of God remembering their ancient rescue out of slavery and darkness in Egypt. And God led them by a pillar of fire by night. In a world without light pollution, a bonfire on top of the hill would shine through the night for miles. All the people of God could look towards the temple and see this great inferno burning. And so as this giant flame burnt through the night, shone in the darkness, and people remembered about God's incredible rescue, Jesus comes to them and says, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life. The pillar of flame is long gone. The fire in the temple is going to burn out. But he says he is the light, the flame not only of a nation but of the world. And so God's great and ancient rescue doesn't only have to be history, a long distant memory, because here is the true light to bring true rescue. Whoever follows him never has to walk anymore in spiritual darkness, and slavery to sin because you will be following the light of life through the darkness of this world.

As last week we saw Jesus' offer of living water, he couldn't be more inviting, could he? But as we're seeing in John's gospel, even back then, Jesus could say with God, as he says in Isaiah 65, I have held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people. Because it doesn't matter how free or gracious his offer is or how often he offers it, it seems, the crowd in Jerusalem takes issue with him. The Pharisees, verse 13, challenge him. Here you are appearing as your own witness. Your testimony is not valid. So in the face of Jesus saying he is the light of the world, come to me, you will never walk in darkness again, well they want to write him off on a legal technicality. The law says, as Jesus explained, that a claim could only stand up in court on the testimony of two witnesses. And the Pharisees are saying, well you can't act as your own witness in this case. So what you're saying isn't valid. We don't have to listen to what you have to say anymore. Now Jesus does answer that problem. But just pausing for a minute, do you see what the Pharisees have done here? They have put Jesus on trial. You need two witnesses for a court case, not truth claims in general. No matter how great those claims are, they have put Jesus in the dock. Verses 13 to 18, packed with legal language, testify, testimony, judge, judgment, witnesses, witness. And as Jesus points out to them in verse 15, what they've done is appointed themselves as judge and jury. You judge, he says, by human standards.

[10 : 26] But should they be standing over Jesus as judges? Should they be putting him on trial? Are they qualified to weigh up his claims and come to a decision?

It's true that Jesus is who he says he is, that he is from God. Well, how could they investigate that? So, says Jesus, verse 14, even if I do testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I'm going.

You have no idea where I come from or where I'm going. What's more, the second witness that Jesus calls to this mock trial, so to speak, is God himself.

See that in verse 18, I am one who testifies for myself. My other witness is the Father who sent me. We saw back in chapter 5 the evidence that the Father gives in Jesus' signs, his miracles, and in the scriptures themselves.

So, what qualifies these guys, or any of us for that matter, to stand as judge and jury over Jesus?

[11 : 41] He is simply not ours to judge. He is not of this world. Until recently, I think, we did, in the West at least, see Jesus as being our thing.

There's a book that I love called *The Innocent Anthropologist*, by a guy called Nigel Barley, and he travels to West Africa, and on his way, he meets various missionaries, and he looks down on these missionaries, for, in his words, exporting a belief system from the West, that we, in the West, have given up on ourselves.

But see what he's done there. It's as if Christianity, Jesus, is our thing. And if the West has judged Christianity to be wrong and outdated, well, our world, our word should be final for everyone. Who do we have a right to tell about Jesus if our society has judged him to be outdated? It's the same logic, I think, by which, in the media, at least being a Muslim in Britain is celebrated, but being a Christian in Britain is, at best, tolerated.

Even if the issues for a secular society are the same with both those religions, because Islam, the logic goes, is not ours to judge. But Christianity Christianity is.

[13:12] And we, in the West, have judged it outdated and wrong. But friends, Jesus isn't ours to judge. He was qualified to say on behalf of the world, he is not who he says he is.

You can know better than him who he is and where he came from. Jesus puts it more bluntly, you are from below, I am from above. You are of this world, I am not of this world.

And so I think it's a good thing that the sense of ownership that we maybe have had of Jesus is fading now that we are a few generations removed. Lots of people are from any meaningful Christian influence.

I think, ironically, as a result, lots of people are more open to giving Jesus an honest hearing. But having our minds made up about Jesus before we've really listened to him, it is an error that we do face in our world.

And the consequences are eternal, says Jesus. See that in verse 24? I told you, you would die in your sins. If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins.

[14:33] So Jesus is really clear, setting ourselves up as judges over him, however we do it, whether we do that intellectually and academically, or whether we do that at popular kind of street level, if we do that, it will end with us, the judges, being judged for our sins.

And so Jesus graciously calls us to step down, doesn't he? Step down from our self-made thrones and simply watch him and listen to him.

And when we have seen him for who he is, to come forward as a witness for him. The Pharisees were in the dark about Jesus as long as they stood over him, but he says, when they would see him at last high and lifted up, then they would see him for who he is, the light of the world.

For he says, when you've lifted up the Son of Man, that is on the cross, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.

It's only when we humble our hearts and kneel at the foot of the cross that we truly see Jesus for who he is, that we can see he came from the Father, put our trust in him, and so become children of God.

[16:00] If you know me, says Jesus, you know my Father also. Secondly, we see that neither are God's children those who refuse his teaching and not those who stand over him as judge, not those who refuse his teaching.

So verse 30, even as he spoke, many believed in him. And to the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said, if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. So some of the crowd do believe in him, or so it seemed. So Jesus begins to teach them what it means to follow him, to be his disciples.

Now imagine someone says to you, listen, we've talked a lot about Christianity, I've thought about it, and I want to become a Christian. How do I start doing that?

Well, after telling them how delighted you are for them and how that is an answer to prayer, what would you say? Where does someone start following Jesus?

[17:11] Maybe you would talk to them about praying the sinner's prayer. Maybe you would invite them to come along with you to church. But Jesus takes a slightly different tack, doesn't he?

To the Jews who believed in him, Jesus said, if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Jesus says, hold to my teaching.

And the word for hold is the same word we find later in chapter 15, translated abide, where Jesus says, abide in me and I in you.

if you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.

Abide, remain, reside, live in me, says Jesus, and have my words live in you.

It's the same as what Paul's talking about in Colossians chapter 3, verse 16, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. So what Jesus is talking about is an ongoing commitment to his teaching as a way of life.

[18 : 23] As long as Jesus' words, his teaching are resident in our hearts, as long as he is the homeowner, so to speak, then we are his disciples, his followers.

If you're just starting out as a Christian, maybe in the first year or two, well, this is where Jesus says to invest your time heavily. Get his word into your bloodstream.

Read it, study it, meditate on it, talk about it. You can study it on your own, better still, study it with other older Christians, because there's no better start in the Christian life than the pure spiritual milk of God's word.

And of course, brothers and sisters, while we live, we never leave the Jesus school of discipleship, do we? Graduation day for us is the day when we go to be with him, either when we die or he comes back.

And so until that day, abide in his word, hold on to his teaching, because he says, then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

[19 : 37] See, his teaching doesn't just break the chains of sin at first, it's what stops us going back and leaving our freedom and taking back the chains of sin again.

So Jesus is speaking here to those who have just said, we believe in you, but even among these people, there are grumbles, aren't there? Verse 33, they answered him, we are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone.

How can you say that we shall be set free? Now, here's where we see whatever reason these guys were drawn to Jesus, it clearly wasn't his teaching, but their complaint against Jesus is wrong for two reasons.

Why should they not hold his teaching and be free? Well, firstly, because being Abraham's descendants, surely they knew, if they knew their history, that in fact their ancestors had been slaves, Pharaoh in Egypt hundreds of years before.

God saved them, of course, through the Exodus, starring, of course, the pillar of fire. But secondly, their selective memory matters because as we have been seeing, Jesus has come to bring a new Exodus rescue.

[21 : 00] He is the pillar of flame that gives light to the world. and he is leading people out of slavery and through the darkness. That is his offer.

And so if these guys don't remember the physical slavery of the past and they don't see their need, the reality of spiritual slavery now, well, how will they take the truth to heart and follow Jesus into freedom, out of slavery, into eternal life?

Jesus explains this, verse 34, very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.

So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know you're Abraham's descendants, yet you're looking for a way to kill me because you have no room for my word.

It doesn't matter who your family is, says Jesus. Your need is the same. Here's the heart of the problem, he says.

[22 : 10] You guys think because you're descended from this special man, Abraham, therefore you are bona fide children of God. Well, didn't God choose Abraham?

Didn't God promise to be God to him and to his descendants? Isn't God their father? Well, says Jesus, it depends on how you treat his son.

He is the son of the household. His word sets us free. But Abraham's family are trying to kill him, which begs the question, who is really their father if it is not God?

That they insist that Abraham is our father? Hmm, says Jesus. Well, you're not acting much like your father then. If you were Abraham's children, then you would do what Abraham did.

As it is, you're looking for a way to kill me, a man who's told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. So they go the next step, if you like, I suppose a bit riled up.

[23 : 22] Verse 41, the only father we have is God himself. Hmm, says Jesus. Well, I don't really see that either. If God were your father, you would love me, for I have come here from God.

He is peeling back their sense of who they are, this sense of self-identity that they have built up to show them that they are wearing a mask.

They are not who they think they are. They've been living in a hall of mirrors. They have a distorted view of themselves because they think they are the children of God.

But the children of God love his son, Jesus, and hoards to his teaching. And these guys are not doing that.

Now, this is probably a bit closer to the bone for us than being a judge over Jesus because Jesus is speaking to people who have professed faith in him.

[24 : 28] And yet, when they are pressed, they are found not to be resting their hope in who he is, but in who they are. So how might any of us fall into that trap?

Or perhaps by thinking that we are children of God because we have been born into a Christian family? perhaps thinking that we are children of God because we were baptized?

Perhaps thinking we are children of God because we have spent lots of time in a good church?

Perhaps thinking we are children of God because we have a position or responsibility in the church, being a minister?

Friends, these are all things that have caused people to tell themselves whether silently in their hearts or out loud, that they don't need to trust completely in Jesus and his words to be a child of God.

But that is a complete lie. God's God's God's God's God's children of God. Because in fact the opposite is true of them.

[25 : 48] If we think that we do not need Jesus and his rescue, who does Jesus say our father is? See what Jesus says to them in verse 44. These are shocking words.

Jesus says they can't stomach the truth because their father is a father. You want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.

When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me. Jesus says they can't stomach the truth because their father, is the father of lies.

Those are shocking words. Let's be clear about what Jesus is saying. It doesn't matter if you're the Archbishop of Canterbury or a single mum in a slum somewhere in Peru.

If you do not take Jesus' words to heart, you are serving a different master, says Jesus. You are blinded by the Prince of Darkness. Jesus said that.

[27 : 03] For verse 47, whoever belongs to God hears what God says. And so the children of God are not those either who refuse Jesus' teaching.

So who then are the children of God? Coming into land then, you see finally that the children of God are those who rejoice in Jesus and receive his teaching.

see that in verse 51. Very truly I tell you, says Jesus, whoever obeys my word will never see death. The Jews have already insulted Jesus once, you're demon possessed, but at these words they say, now we know you're demon possessed.

Come off it, Jesus. Who do you think you are? It's an incredible claim. And if we do believe in Jesus, receive his words and live by them, we will never die.

We've heard Jesus offer eternal life in this gospel. Well, here's the flip side, whoever believes in him will never taste death. Because as he explained last Sunday, if we come to him and drink, we will have the life of God living in us.

[28 : 17] So how can we then die when we are united by faith through Christ and by the Spirit to the eternal life of God himself? How can we die when we are children of the living God?

And so God's children, those who inherit this eternal life from him, are those who obey his word, receive Jesus' teaching. And when Jesus talks about obeying his word, to be really clear, he's not just talking about living a good life, following the rules.

he's talking about acting on what he has told us about our need for a rescue and trusting him to do it. Now, the person who came to mind as I mulled over this during the week, of all people, was the Queen.

If you have your TV switched on at three o'clock on Christmas Day, which I hope you do, you'll hear Her Majesty the Queen speak every year about, quote unquote, the teachings of Jesus.

And she says before the nation that she has built her life on those teachings. Now, that might sound to us a bit wishy-washy, a bit weak, but this is what I think she means, what Jesus is saying, that she holds to Jesus' teaching, that she obeys his word, that she has believed and received what Jesus says about our natural slavery to sin, our need for his rescue, and trusts him to do it.

[29 : 57] That's what Jesus means when he says, obey my word, hold to my teaching. And so whoever does that will never see death.

One day, we will hear the news that the Queen has died. I think that will only be true in a sense. Because Jesus says, whoever obeys my word will never see death. The Jews respond to this by asking, who does this guy think he is? Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died. So did the prophets. Who do you think you are? See, they're still clinging on, aren't they, to Abraham, their family connections for their eternal hope. but, says Jesus, verse 56, your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day. He saw it and was glad. And so to be a child of God and to be a true child of Abraham, well, it means rejoicing in Jesus himself, loving him, delighting in him, believing in him. [31 : 06] So we heard earlier in our service from Romans, isn't it, that Abraham is the father of those who have faith in Jesus. And so he is our father today if we trust him.

What do you know about Abraham, asked the crowd. Well, here's the bombshell in verse 58. We started, didn't we, with an I am, and we'll finish with an I am also. Very truly, I tell you, Jesus answered, before Abraham was, I am. How does Jesus know what he's talking about?

How does he know Abraham? Well, he says he was there. Before Abraham was, Jesus is, before the beginning of the world, before time itself, when there was nothing but God. Remember Moses asking God, who should I tell the people who you are? what is your name? And God said to him, well, tell them, I am sent you.

[32 : 13] I am who I am. So, says Jesus, before Abraham was, I am. Here, then, is why those who believe in Jesus, who trust him for his rescue, are the children of God, because he is God incarnate, the eternal son of the father, the word, become flesh.

And so, tonight, do you believe him? And do you receive his rescue? And do you abide in his words? For Christ alone is what makes us children of the living God.

Believe him, receive in him, receive him and his rescue, abide in his words, and you will belong to God forever. Let's pray together now.

God, our Father, we thank you so much for the gift of your son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you that he came with this offer, this identity, that he says he is the light of the world.

And what he offers us is never to walk in darkness, but to walk in the light of life forever. Father, we pray that you would help each of us to take Jesus up on that offer, to see him for who he is, the light that gives light to everyone who has come into the world.

[33 : 56] Father, to those who struggle to trust him, pray Lord, that you would strengthen their faith. Lord, to those who struggle to hold to his teaching, Lord, that you would grant a knowledge of ye that compels them, Lord, to abide in your word.

Lord, we thank you that your Holy Spirit is living and that he works in our hearts to draw us to Jesus and to give us the things of Christ. And so, Lord, we pray that he would work through your word this evening.

Lord, keep us trusting him, keep us in his word, keep us going, Lord, to eternal life. We thank you for adopting us, our Father, into your family through Christ.

Pray, Lord, that we would rejoice in him and in this identity that you have given us as your sons and daughters through faith. We thank you in Jesus' name.

Amen.