

## Sermon 22, Like Father, Like Son, 1 John 2:29

**Proposition:** To do righteous deeds flows from being begotten as God's righteous child!

- I. Righteousness: The Father's Gift
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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to another perfectly profound statement made by the Apostle John. It is simple; it only makes a single point, which is that righteousness is an infallible sign of begottenness. And yet to make that point, it draws on the deepest theological truths known to the human race. Begottenness, of course, presupposes the Father's existence. It defines our identity in Christ, the Only Begotten. And it results in our righteous activity. John starts the other way round, though, by invoking the righteousness of Christ as the Begotten and then linking it to our righteousness as also-begotten ones. What we will see together, then, with God's help, is that righteous deeds flow from our being begotten by God as His righteous children.

#### **I. Righteousness: The Father's Gift**

Righteousness is that which is in accordance with right. I love that definition because it's memorable. To be righteous is to be someone who does what's right, says what's right, and thinks what's right. To be righteous is to be morally right in everything you do. And the first thing John tells us in this verse is that we know that Jesus is righteous. We know that He is righteous!

Why does the apostle use an "if" here? Is it conceivable that some Christians don't know that Jesus is righteous? Not really. Rather, the "if" is simply part of the style, in which the whole sentence is phrased as a hypothetical (an if-then) statement, even though we know that both halves of it are true. Essentially, it's phrased as a hypothetical not because it's uncertain, but because the apostle wants us to think about the consequences of the truth he's writing. If you know this (and all Christians know it), then you know that you have the strongest reason in the world for being righteous.

Yet behind this statement about Jesus' righteousness (a statement we'll excavate more in a moment) stands the reality that righteousness is the Father's gift. John indeed says that at the

end of the verse with regard to us, but it's true not just with regard to us but also with regard to Jesus Christ. The ultimate source of righteousness is the Father.

Now, we know that the Father is the ultimate source of everything, including His Son and His Spirit. We know that all that exists is from the Father. But John wants us to focus specifically this morning on the truth that righteousness is from the Father. It is a gift, and it is a gift given by the action of begetting.

To beget or father a child is an amazing process. Those who have done it are united with those who have never done it in this: Neither one understands it. The actions of begetting are completely incommensurate with the product. A great time with my wife is, well, great, but a new human being is incomparably greater. We don't understand begetting, even when we engage in it! But though we don't understand it, John calls us to admire it. The Father is righteous. He always does and thinks and says what is morally right. He never does anything morally wrong, never thinks anything morally wrong, never says anything morally wrong. He is righteous. And that righteousness is stamped on the character of His children. It is a moral trait, not specifically genetic but nonetheless heritable and indeed inherited by every one of His children.

## **II. Righteousness: The Son's Character**

The greatest example of this is our Lord Jesus Christ. You know that Jesus is righteous.

He was righteous in His birth; He came into the world free from the smallest taint of original sin, of internal corruption, of anything wrong with his character or desires.

He was righteous in His life, perfectly obedient to His mother and father, perfectly carrying out the will of His Heavenly Father, perfectly kind and charitable and loving to everyone He met but also perfectly inflexible, unwilling to lie or justify sin in the smallest degree.

He was righteous in His death, submitting with perfect willingness to His Father's plan for His death on behalf of sinners and giving up His life by His own choice so that we could be freed from sin.

He was righteous in His resurrection, in His ascension, and remains sitting in perfect righteousness at His Father's right hand. He will show His righteousness once more in coming to judge the world. Oh, brothers and sisters, do you know Jesus as the righteous one? Do you fear His righteousness and adore it at the same time?

## **III. Righteousness: The Action of God's Child**

Yet as important as the application "worship Jesus" is (and it's the most important application any sermon could have), it is not the only application John makes. He is telling us not only to worship Jesus, but also to be like Him. What we share with Him is the same paternity. We are God's children as He is God's child.

### **A. "Being Precedes Action"**

Now, John reverses the order here. The old scholastic dictum tells us that action follows being, or that being precedes action. In other words, before you can do anything you have to exist! That is

obvious. The non-existent doesn't do anything. It can't, because it doesn't exist. You have to be before you can do.

This principle is very obvious, and very true. So why does John appear to contradict it? Rather than speaking of being first, he speaks first of action. The one who does righteousness is born of God. The action comes first in his sentence, and the being or nature comes afterward. Why does John do that? Because he wants to emphasize the action. You and I need to be righteous. We need to do what's right. We need to think and say what's right. We all know that, of course. It's not news to any of us. But in tandem with the law, commanding us to be righteous, John is giving us the gospel — the good news that in Christ, we are righteous.

### **B. Action Reveals Being**

You see, the corollary of being preceding action is that what a thing does tells you what it is. I was reading a review of the film *The Irishman*, where some of the actors were digitally de-aged to portray younger versions of themselves. The reviewer commented that the way the ostensibly young actor crawled over rocks at the beach revealed all too clearly that he was actually old. A young man wouldn't move with such caution and pain. And so it is in all kinds of scenarios. The sound it makes when you tap it reveals whether it's plastic or wood. The speed it goes reveals whether it is a passenger car or a race car. The way you live tells where you're from.

#### **1. All the Ones Doing Righteousness Are God-Begotten**

And this is really John's point. The law says "Be righteous," but the gospel proclaims "Everyone who is righteous is God-begotten." In the gospel of John, we are told that to those who received Christ, who believed on His name, He gave the right to become sons of God. In other words, it really does go both ways. Everyone who is begotten by God the Father has been given an internal principle of new life from which righteous actions flow. Yet the flip side is true as well: Everyone who performs righteous actions has been begotten by God the Father. It is a "biconditional" logical relationship, the double "if and only if." You will do righteous actions if and only if God has fathered you. That's how we can be completely certain that anyone doing something righteous has been fathered by God. But to be fathered by God is simply another aspect of the relationship expressed by believing in Jesus. A third aspect of this relationship is the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. He is the one who grows out of you the good actions that John calls righteousness here and that Paul calls "love" in the Fruit of the Spirit passage in Galatians.

Do you want to be born of God? Then believe in Jesus. Do you want to have Jesus as yours? Then do righteous actions.

Two obvious questions arise: What about those who do righteous things but don't believe in Jesus or have God for their Father? What about the fact that everyone who does righteousness also does wickedness, and possibly more wickedness than righteousness? As we asked before, how much righteousness do you have to do to be God-begotten?

Let's take these in turn. What do we make of the virtuous pagan, of the upright and honest but unrelievedly secular people we meet in this life? Some of you have told me "My

parents are not Christians but they're very moral." Is John saying that morality is the same thing as Christianity? Is he saying that to live a good life is identical to being born again, this time with God as your Father? The answer is no. John is using righteousness in the full sense here, the sense of not mere outward conformity to God's law that we generally mean when we say "He did the right thing," but the sense of total inward conformity, where obedience to God is driven by a heart that loves God. The Fruit of the Spirit is love — that is, you can't truly love without the presence of the Holy Spirit in your heart. You can't do righteousness in the Biblical sense without being a Christian, because righteousness demands not only impeccable actions but also impeccable motives. In the language of virtue ethics, we could say that good acts must be done by a good person in order to be genuinely good, because by definition all acts have to be things that persons do.

That, though, brings up the second question — one we asked before. How much righteousness do you have to do to be God-begotten? The answer is simple. One single righteous action is irrefutable proof that you have been fathered by God. That is the claim of the whole Bible — that those who are still in their sins can't do even one good thing, cannot love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind, can't do the right thing for a fully correct reason.

Of course, this answer simply drives the question into another form — how righteous does that one single action have to be to show God-begottenness? If my motives are 99.9% pure, is that good enough, or do they have to be 100% pure? In one sense, of course, the answer is clear: The law requires 100% purity. A single truly good action has to be truly good all the way down.

In another sense, though, Christian, neither of these questions is appropriate. John is not attempting to give us a scale on which we can measure how pure our motives are. He is not even, in the first instance, administering a paternity test. Rather, his point is a little different.

## **2. The Point: Christian, Your Begottenness Drives Your Righteousness!**

It is this: Your begottenness drives your righteousness! The thing that allows you to do anything good at all, to have anything approaching pure motives, is your status as a child of God. And that status is not created or achieved by anything you do. It is an unmerited gift, as shown most clearly in Jesus' statement "You must be born again." Yes, the way to receive the new birth is by faith in Jesus Christ. But ultimately new birth is God's act. You can't force a man to beget you, to become your father. You can't force anyone to adopt you. Nor can you force God to beget you. But the proclamation John is making here is that God has begotten you if you know Jesus as the righteous one. Since God has begotten you, you are now able to be righteous, for the character of God has been stamped on you as His child. You have the invincible anointing of the Holy Spirit. You have the mark of adoption stamped on you, and that mark is the character of a child of God. You are positionally holy, and so you need to be practically holy. You are positionally righteous, and so you need to be practically righteous. You are a child of God, and so you need to behave like a child of God. Believe it, and then live it.

So is this verse a paternity test? Should we look at ourselves and say “Am I behaving like a child of God?” The answer is “Absolutely.” Are you living up to your new birth? Are you behaving like one of the children of God? A child of God does the right thing because a child of God has the Holy Spirit and the Father and the Son. A child of God does the right thing by the power of God. Being precedes action. You don’t do the right thing to become a child of God; you do the right thing because you *are* a child of God. Be what you are — and I’ll see you at our family reunion next Sunday. Amen.