

## Sermon 24, Like Him, 1 John 3:2-3

**Proposition:** Since you are a God's child and destined to see Him, your settled hope will motivate you to seek moral purity!

- I. Our Status: Beloved Children of God
- II. Our Future Appearance
  - A. It's Unknown
  - B. It's Godlike
  - C. It's a Product of Seeing God
- III. Our Hope: The Beatific Vision
- IV. Our Response: Self-Purification

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the text before us this morning is without a doubt one of the Bible's great texts. In one sense, anything I can say about this verse will be a detriment to it — will not possibly be as grand, as overwhelming, as beautiful as the verse itself. That, of course, is a hazard with all preaching, and one you've probably experienced. The text is great; the message, poor. But by the grace of God, I hope to explain and apply this text to you this morning in such a way that its native grandeur is allowed to shine through. I want you to leave energized and motivated by the profundity of hope. Your settled hope of seeing Christ and being like Him should motivate you to purify yourself here and now!

#### **I. Our Status: Beloved Children of God**

Like every good teacher, John begins with what we know and takes us to what we don't know. Here's what we know: we are beloved. Now, this is not normal language, in John's era or in ours. Some of you may remember the film *Master and Commander*, based on Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin novels. In those novels, Stephen Maturin calls various people who are not his romantic partners "my dear." It's jarring. Within my own lifetime, the habit of addressing letters to "dear" so-and-so has completely disappeared, even though I was taught as a child that it was the only polite way to begin a letter. Now, though, the thought of addressing one's boss or co-worker as "dear" is almost enough to generate a lawsuit. Yet that doesn't stop John here. He knows it sounds a little strange. Indeed, especially outside a romantic context, calling someone "beloved" just isn't done. At least, you don't do it unless you genuinely mean it. And John means it. He calls you "beloved" because he loves you. I say "Hi Megan" when I'm writing to my boss. I don't say "dear Megan," even though she's a fellow believer. And I certainly don't call her, or my friends, or really anyone except my wife and baby girl "beloved." But the new relationships with each other that a relationship with Christ brings result in genuine care for each other, a care so deep that we actually love one another.

I was noticing this on our recent trip back East, where we saw people that Alexa and I used to worship with at two different churches. The strength of our connection with them was amazing, even though we hadn't seen them in years. Why? Because nothing draws you together with others like worshipping together.

So that's the first thing you know. You are beloved. Someone cares about you. In fact, your entire church family cares about you. Ideally, if you're investing in your church the way you should, nearly everyone in this room this morning regards you as beloved and wants to help you.

But even better than this title "beloved" is John's other announcement: we are children of God! To be loved by human beings is a tremendous gift. But to be loved by God is a gift beyond all gifts. And to be loved by God as His child is the best thing we can imagine. Parents, how do you feel about your children? Would you be content to give them away, sell them, fail to provide for them? Of course not! He who loves his wife loves himself, but he who loves his child loves himself in a certain sense as well. Your child is uniquely your own flesh and blood. And that's how God feels about you. Indeed, if you subtract all the imperfections, acts of impatience, hurry, and neglect that so often characterize your own love for your children, that will give you a better idea of the perfection with which God loves and cares for His children. We are children of God, and we are children of God right now! That means that we have entered into an inalienable relationship with Him. He has taken us in as His, and He will never let us go. You are God's child, His beloved offspring, someone for whom He cares deeply and whom He won't let go.

This is not the universal condition of mankind. Yes, in one sense God begot Adam. But John is clear that God is not the Father of all human beings alike. To those who received Christ He gave the right to become sons of God — and to those who did not receive Christ He did not give that right. Brothers and sisters, I can call you beloved, I can call you brothers and sisters, because we share a common parent. We have God in common.

We will never be more children of God than we are now. You can't be partially someone's child. It's all-or-nothing. And with God, it is all. We are His children all the way. John is emphasizing that *now* we are children to God to tell us not that we will be something else later on, but rather to say that being God's children is not a status we'll achieve later. It's a status He's granted to us here and now. You will never be more a Christian than you are now. You will never be more loved and accepted and forgiven than you are now. You will never belong to God more completely than you do now. Right now, on this particular Sunday morning, you are a child of God. In one sense, you might think that you have nothing left to look forward to. The sum and substance of the Christian life is yours. That's because Christ is yours, His Father is yours, and His Spirit is yours. And thus, everything that belongs to the undivided Trinity also belongs to you in the use of it, with appropriate caveats and limitations. The best analogy here is the human household. If as an adult, I go over to your house, I am not welcome to go explore the private areas of the home. It would be very rude of me to look through your bedroom or examine your closet. But if I go over as a child, and spend time with your child, we have the run of the house.

Your child goes into your bedroom and examines your closet and rides in your cars and digs holes in your backyard. Are all of those things his? Not exactly. But they belong to his family, and so he ranges freely over them all. And that is true of us too. Whatever belongs to God belongs to us. That doesn't mean that we ought to trespass on our neighbors or abuse the wilderness, any more than you child is welcomed to wear your clothes or drive your cars without asking. There are limits — but there is also a basic underlying sense that these things are not alienated from me; these things are my dad's and so they are mine.

This is true of you now! And therefore, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments on this text, our biggest problem as Christians is our failure to make use of what we have. You don't need to think of yourself as an impoverished, weak Christian whose resources are so inadequate that you can barely survive. That's not true! You have Christ, and therefore you have everything you need to live a flourishing life. Yes, you may not have enough respect, enough human contact, enough love from your family and your coworkers, enough food or sleep. But if you have Jesus, you have everything that you really need to live a life of faith, hope, and love. You have a credit card in your pocket with Heaven's expense account attached to it. But because it will only buy the spiritual things that really matter, you and I tend to think that it's worthless. What's more important, or a meal or an attitude of thanksgiving? Recognition at work or love in your heart? Joy in the Lord, or freedom from external problems? If I've said it once I've said it a dozen times. I love to go drive around resort areas, look at the mansions, and say "Wow. The people in this giant house must have no problems and be happy all day long."

Brothers and sisters, the privilege we have as Christians is not the lesser privilege of holding earthly riches, but the far, far greater privilege of enjoying Heavenly happiness! If you had to pick only one, which would you choose?

## **II. Our Future Appearance**

Yet John doesn't stop there. We have unsearchable riches in Christ because we are His Father's children right now. And that will never change. The contrast is not between being God's children now and not being God's children later. The contrast is rather between the expression of that now and the expression of it that will come later. Now we are God's children. We know what that looks like now. It looks like a small church in a tough town. It looks like cultural marginalization. It looks like opinions that the rest of the world considers absurd. It looks like love and joy within our own little community of believers here that our unbelieving friends can hardly even imagine or believe in. If you want to know what it looks like to be a child of God here and now, look around you. But what will it look like to be a child of God when our glorification is complete?

### **A. It's Unknown**

John has no idea. Paul had no idea. We don't know how glorious it will be. Why has no eye seen, no ear heard it, no heart conceived it, the things that God has prepared for those who love Him? Well, as it is the tiny hints and rumors that we have now are already unbelievable enough. The devil is in the details, right? We have a generalized concept of Heaven as a place with golden

streets and no death, sorrow, crying, or pain. But if we had a full-blown book describing every aspect of it, then those details would likely make it even harder to believe. And so, John says that what it will look like to be God's children has not yet appeared. We simply don't know, and it's probably fair to say that we can't know. The expression of it would be either unintelligible to us or downright absurd to our present way of thinking. What form being children of God will take in the age to come has not yet been manifested.

But that said, we know two things for sure about it.

### **B. It's Godlike**

Number one, it's godlike. We know that we will be like Him. Now, generally, I think most of us think of this verse in terms of being like Christ. But many commentators argued that a reference to God fits better, and I agree. Of course, in one sense it doesn't matter. To be like Christ is to be like God, and vice versa. But God was just mentioned earlier in the verse, and John uses the standard "Him" here, presumably referring back to God. When he wants to refer to Jesus, John usually says "that one" instead of "Him." Anyway, John and the other apostles had seen Jesus as He was, and they had not been transformed into their final state of heavenly glory. On the other hand, of course, if you think the verse is talking about Jesus appearing, then we will be Christlike. At the end of the day, the difference is minimal.

Are you ready to spend eternity in godlikeness? Do you understand that what you are now, a child of God, is inevitably going to develop into being like your Father? So many of us, as we get older, look in the mirror and say "Wow! I see my mom! I see my dad! I see my grandpa!" But of course, the resemblance is never complete, because all of us are the product of two parents and we have at least a little of both somewhere in there. God, though, is the only begetter of spiritual children. We are His children, and that means that we are destined to be perfectly like Him.

### **C. It's a Product of Seeing God**

John gives us one final clue. We will begin to look like God when we see Him as He is. I think all of us understand that the obvious point of this sentence is that the very sight of the King in His beauty is transformative. As Paul put it, we are changed by seeing the glory of Christ: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2Co 3:18 NKJ). Calvin disagrees; he says that what John means is that we can't see Him as He is unless we are like Him. And so to tell us that we will see God is to tell us that we are going to be perfectly like Him. That makes sense, but based on the other biblical testimony I just quoted, which clearly says that seeing Christ's glory transforms us toward that glory, I believe that the likeness is a consequence of the seeing rather than the seeing being a consequence of the likeness.

That means that we need to be looking to Jesus now, as children of God. The more of His glory we see the more satisfied, the more joyful, the more spiritually rich we will be!

### **III. Our Hope: The Beatific Vision**

Theologians have called this sight of God the beatific vision, the sight that makes you blessed. And they are exactly right. We talk about how wonderful it was to see a particular sunset, or painting, or landscape. More wonderful by far is the experience of seeing the face of a loved one. But to see the face of God is to put all of that together and square it, because God's face is infinitely beautiful, infinitely satisfying, and infinitely beloved to us as well. John calls seeing the face of God our hope. This is fascinating because this is the only time in his gospel, epistles, or Revelation that he uses the noun form of "hope." Hope is not something he talks about very often. But seeing the face of Christ which is the face of God is our hope. It's what we're living for. It's what we want and what we need and what we can't live without. In the light of the king's face is life.

Do you train your hope? Probably all of you meditate from time to time on your next paycheck, on your child's next achievement, on the birth of your next grandbaby or the success of your next project at work. But do you train yourself in the Christian virtue of hope? Do you look beyond the horizon of this life and think about what it will mean to see Christ as He really is? Where's your hope? How hard do you hope? And do you make sure to spend some time every day letting your imagination go on what it will be like to realize the hope of seeing Christ? Brothers and sisters, you have this hope. Biblically speaking, hope is the same thing as confidence. Hope is not something you're guessing may happen; hope is something you can bank on, something you need to plan on.

### **IV. Our Response: Self-Purification**

That's why John is so dogmatic here. Everyone who has this hope in Christ purifies himself. It's not "most people with this hope" or "some people with this hope." It's every last Christian who acts on this hope. Why is that? Because to hope for God to fulfill His promises means *planning* on Him fulfilling His promises. If I'm planning to go to Palm Spings, I pack my swim trunks. If I'm planning to buy you lunch, I bring my wallet. If I'm planning to go to Heaven, I'm getting ready for that too. And the way to get ready for Heaven is to purify myself. What does this mean? It means getting rid of sin by taking it to Jesus. If you understood v. 2 correctly, then you know that it's certain that every child of God will end up looking like Jesus, God's original and natural (as opposed to adopted) child. It's going to happen — so get ready for it.

What if you say "Oh, it's going to happen, eh? Then I think I'll just sit back, relax, and wait for God to do it"? Then that shows it's not going to happen to you. You aren't planning on Heaven at all. You're planning on Hell, because if you're planning to make no effort to obey God then you are going to end up in the place where there isn't any obedience to Him.

So live in hope. Live in the confidence that you will see the face of God. Express that first by looking for that face now in His word and in His people. And then, express it by purifying yourself here and now. Brothers and sisters, Jesus is pure. You are destined to be like Him. That means you will work your tail off to be like Him.

Imagine your mentor, a Harvard professor who seems to know everything. He tells you, “Joe, someday I’d like you to have my job. I want you to be ready to sit in this chair and teach these students when the time comes.” What do you do? You start to study hard so that you can be like your mentor. The gospel as John proclaims it here is emphatic along the same lines. Christ has given you the privilege of adoption as God’s child. You are God’s child now, and nothing can change that. So plan on dwelling in His house forever as His child, seeing His face and being transformed to be like Him. If you’re really planning on that, you’ll move heaven and earth to be as fit for that destination as you can possibly be.

Christ is pure. And you and I will join Him in purity. That’s good news for impure sinners like us. Has sin got you down this week? Then look to Christ. Know that you will see Him as He is, and you will be like Him in purity. Sin can’t stop that, which means that you can stop sinning because God’s promise is more powerful than Satan’s temptations. Amen.