

CHILDREN OF GOD

John 1:12-13

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But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (Jn. 1:12-13).

The youth movement of the 1960's was hailed as a "counter-culture," because of its values of social upheaval, sexual liberation, and psychedelic narcotic highs. But this counter-culture soon proved quite at home in the culture it was intended to confront. Many of the hippies went on to be stock-brokers, and many stock-brokers took up the lifestyle modeled by the hippies.

There really is only one true counter-culture that never becomes absorbed into the world. John describes this in the prologue to his Gospel, telling us that the true light shined in the world but the world rejected him. Rebellion against God and his light is the first principle of this wicked world. But there are some in the world whose attitude is not of this world but of heaven. John says, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (Jn. 1:12). Here is the true counter-culture, the only real alternative to a sinful humanity: those who receive Jesus Christ in faith and thereby become children of God.

THE GREATEST DISTINCTION

There is a basic division within mankind based on our response to Jesus Christ. There is the prevailing culture of unbelief and the counter-culture of Christian faith. Charles Spurgeon said, "Were

an angel to come here with a drawn sword, and suddenly to separate the righteous from the wicked with one stroke, you would find that his sword had for its edge the question, ‘Believest thou in the Lord Jesus Christ?’”¹ It is faith in Christ that makes the greatest distinction in our world. John 3:36 puts it this way: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

We recognize all kinds of distinctions among people. There are the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the powerful and the weak, the moral and the immoral. Today, political views seem to divide us more and more. But according to the Bible, in God’s sight all people are united under the guilt and curse of sin, regardless of all other distinctions. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We all have transgressed God’s law, and whether we are Caesar or slave here on earth, in God’s sight we are united in the condemnation of sin. The only distinction that will last is faith in Christ: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life... but whoever does not believe is condemned already” (Jn. 3:16, 18).

If faith in Christ is the great distinction, we should want to know what faith is. John 1:12 gives a definition: “All who received him, who believed on his name.” Faith, then, involves believing and receiving Jesus Christ as he has revealed himself – in his person and saving work. It is not enough to have vague notions about Jesus. People say, “I believe in Jesus,” meaning that they accept that he existed or even appreciate him in some sense. But that is not receiving Jesus Christ and it does not constitute saving faith. Faith requires us to receive Jesus as he has offered himself to us. John spells this out at the end of this Gospel: “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn. 20:31).

First, we must receive Jesus as the person he has revealed himself to be. This especially means acknowledging him as the unique Son of God. Some people admire Jesus but doubt that he could really be God’s Son. But the Bible insists: “The Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 1212 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 33-34.

God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 Jn. 4:14-15). To deny Jesus’ unique deity is to reject him. Jesus insists that we receive him not only as fully human but also as fully God.

Jesus confronted his own disciples about this matter. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” he asked. They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Jesus pressed them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus hailed that profession of faith as the rock on which he would build his church (Mt. 16:13-18). We must make likewise profess Jesus as God’s Son.

Secondly, we must receive Jesus in his saving offices. Believing “in his name” includes accepting him in his God-given work. “Christ” means “Anointed One.” It refers to the three anointed offices of Old Testament Israel – prophet, priest, and king – which pointed to and were fulfilled by Jesus. This means that we must receive Jesus as the true prophet who reveals God to us. People are looking for gurus of every kind; Jesus calls us to receive him as our Teacher. Others deny that truth can even be known. But Jesus claims to be God, who knows all truth perfectly, and he came to teach the truth to the world. “Your word is truth,” he said to the Father (Jn. 17:17). To refuse to accept God’s Word – the Bible – as genuine and binding truth is to reject Christ as prophet. He said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31-32). Faith says to Jesus:

Thou art the Truth, thy word alone true wisdom can impart
To thee alone I yield a willing mind, and open all my heart.

Jesus also claims the office of priest. The Old Testament priests offered sacrifices to God – lambs and bulls and goats – to purify sinners. Jesus came as the true sacrifice and the true high priest. John the Baptist said of him, “Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). Receiving Jesus in his office of priest means confessing your need to be cleansed from your sin and trusting his death for your forgiveness. It requires you to renounce every other ground for pardon with God – all human priests, saints, rituals, and even your supposedly good works. 1 Timothy 2:5 says, “There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.” Faith says:

Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.
Naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace.
Foul, I, to the Fountain fly; wash me Savior or I die.

Lastly, Jesus comes to us in the office of king. The kings of Israel were anointed to rule God's people, and Jesus is the true Anointed One, the Christ, and the king of kings. Receiving him and believing on his name means bending the knee and opening your heart to be ruled by him. Jesus came to forgive our sins, but also to lead us into a new life of righteousness. We do not receive him unless we are willing to yield to his commands. Our faith says to him:

My King supreme, to thee I bow, a willing subject at thy feet;
All other Lords I disavow, and to thy government submit

This is what it means to have faith in Christ, which makes the great distinction between those who are saved and those who are lost: to receive him as Son of God and as Christ in all his offices – prophet, priest, and king.

And we must receive him personally. It is one thing to acknowledge that a feast is prepared, but another to come and eat. We must not merely assent to Jesus as *a* God and *a* Christ, but say: “Jesus, you are *my* God. You are *my* Christ – *my* prophet, *my* priest, and *my* king.” The great dividing line of the human race – a distinction that will last forever – is between those who personally receive Jesus in faith and those who refuse him in rebellious unbelief. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish” (Jn. 10:27-28).

THE HIGHEST PRIVILEGE

Faith also grants us the highest privilege: “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (Jn. 1:12). People work all their lives to receive titles and privileges – to become vice president or chairman of the board. Others dream of being a son or daughter of some noble king or high official. But John holds before us the highest possible privilege: we become children of God through faith in Christ.

This is our great need, to be brought into God's family and to become his blessed children. People may talk about God being the father of

everyone, but the Bible denies this (see Jn. 8:44). Sinclair Ferguson says:

This is a basic assumption of the Christian gospel: we are not, by nature, children of God. We need to *become* his children. By nature we are alienated from God... Not one of us possesses, by nature, the characteristics of a child of God. Instead, we show all the signs of rebelling against him and turning away from his Fatherly rule over our lives.²

John 1:12 stresses the privileges of membership in God's family: "he gave the *right* to become children of God." This is a change of status. Just as we adopt children, giving them all the rights of family members, God adopts us into a loving, father-child relationship. Jesus is God's true Son and we are adopted as God's sons and daughters in him.

The world thinks little of the privileges of membership in God's family, but they are the greatest that could be imagined. First, we receive the privilege of God's dear fatherly love for us. Some people struggle with the idea of God as Father because their human fathers were unloving or abusive. But God is the true father for whom our hearts have always yearned. This is why we crave a father's love – because God wants us to look to him as Father. "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13). Believers are "beloved children" (Eph. 5:1).

As such, we receive God's gracious care. It is a father's duty to provide for his children, and God has taken up the obligation of caring for believers in Christ. Jesus said, "Even the hairs on your head are numbered" (Mt. 10:30). "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Mt. 6:26). Even earthly parents anticipate their children's needs. A child does not have to ask, because his parents are watching and see needs even where the child does not. "God is like that to us if we are in Christ; he is going to supply our every need because he is our Father."³

Moreover, God grants us the privilege of his loving discipline. No loving father neglects to punish and train his children. We may not

² Sinclair B. Ferguson: *Children of the Living God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth,). 15.

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Life of Peace: An Exposition of Philippians 3 and 4* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 239.

think of it this way, but discipline is a mark of God's fatherly love: "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Heb. 12:6). Earthly fathers do not discipline other peoples' children, but only their own. God chastises us and prods us towards holiness because we are his beloved children.

Furthermore, children of God are heirs of God's eternal glory. This is why God trains us in this life: because we have royal callings awaiting us in the life to come. Romans 8:17 reminds us that Christians are "heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ." Every believer can look forward to an inheritance in glory with God.

Lastly, those who receive Christ are granted the inestimable privilege of intimate access to God in prayer. It is always a thrill when someone you greatly admire takes you into an intimate relationship. He pulls you aside and says, "You don't have to call me 'Mr.'" but simply 'John'. Sinclair Ferguson writes, "But that privilege pales into insignificance by comparison with what we have here. Christ is giving us access to the presence of his Father, and saying to us: 'You may now speak to him as I speak to him; with the same right of access, with the same sense of intimacy, with the same assurance that he loves you.'... We may speak with the Father just as he speaks with the Father."⁴ This is why Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father in heaven."

John 1:12 says these privileges are available to one and all through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the only distinction – not your past, not your rank in the world, not the amount of money you have to give, not your supposed moral attainments: "To all who received him... he gave the right to become children of God" (Jn. 1:12).

This means we should be bold in exercising our privileges, since we received them on the authority of Christ. The Emperor Napoleon once was almost thrown from his horse while reading some papers. A corporal of his grenadiers, a lowly soldier, leaped forward and caught the horse's reins, saving the emperor from injury. Napoleon turned to him and said, "Thank you, Captain." Instantly, the soldier walked over to the headquarters tent, demanding to be issued the uniform of an officer in Napoleon's guards. "On whose authority?" they

⁴ Ferguson, 33.

demanded. “By authority of the emperor,” he replied, and the uniform was issued. We likewise should boldly exercise our privileges as God’s children, claiming our privileges as children of God by authority of God’s royal Son, Jesus Christ, whom we have received through faith.

THE MOST PROFOUND CHANGE

Faith in Christ makes the greatest distinction and grants the highest privilege. Faith also involves the most profound change. John 1:13 says that children of God “were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” John is talking about the spiritual rebirth, one of the great themes of his Gospel. God grants us outward privileges as his children, but he also works in us the spiritual character of his own heavenly family.

How many of us long for a new start in life. Perhaps we remember the innocence of childhood, before we entered into the school of sin and felt its cruel bondage. We think, “O that I could go back and start over again!” This is the very thing God grants to his children. Our spiritual lives begin with a new birth: a new life infused into us so that we are able to believe and live like children of God.

John says that believers are “born of God”. We entered our earthly families because we were born into them. We did not take the initiative; our parents met and produced us, so we became their children. It is obvious that God uses this image to show that he is the one who initiates our salvation; we believe and become his children because he first created the new life in us to do it. We entered our earthly families because we were born of our parents; likewise, we enter God’s family because we are “born of God.” This is what the Bible consistently teaches. Ephesians 1:5 says, “In love, he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ.” James 1:18 says, “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth” (NIV).

Some will ask, “Aren’t I a Christian because I was born into a certain family?” John answers that we become God’s children “not of blood.” Spurgeon writes, “Sin runs in the blood, but grace does not.”⁵ God often brings us to faith by placing us into families where God’s

⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 669 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1969), 27.

Word is taught and lived. But no human family has the virtue to enter you into God's family apart from your personal faith in Jesus.

Moreover, John says we are born "not of the will of the flesh." This distinction is important today, when people associate spiritual experiences with a true work of God. But no surge of the emotions will cause the new birth. Moving people to tears at a church service will not produce the kind of change that transforms us into God's children. We must be born of God and "not of the will of the flesh."

Thirdly, John says we are born "not of the will of man." This, too, cuts across the spirit of our age. People think the rebirth occurs by getting people to exercise their will: by making a decision, by filling out a card, or by walking an aisle in response to an altar call. But John explicitly says it is not the will of man that causes the new birth. The change is a supernatural one, and it cannot be caused by any natural means.

How, then, is anyone saved? The answer is that we are supernaturally born again through God's Word so that we respond in saving faith. This is why the church must devote itself not to cultivating bloodlines, not to inciting emotional highs, and not to appealing to the human will, but by teaching God's Word. By other means we may *warm* the heart so as attract the interest of the world. But only God's Word has power to *transform* the heart with divine power and make us children of God: "born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but born of God". Paul said, "Faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

What, then, should you do? You should receive and believe on Christ as the Bible is preached, for God's Word is the source of spiritual life. You also should read the Bible for yourself. You can start anywhere, but a Gospel like John is an ideal place. Read God's Word prayerfully, asking him to reveal himself to your heart, so that you receive Jesus Christ as he is presented to you. When you believe in him, you will have a new life, with God living in your soul. This is God's way: we are born again "not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23).

NOBLESSE OBLIGE

To be born of God is to experience the most profound change. 2 Peter 1:4 says that believers have become “partakers of the divine nature.” A new spiritual D.N.A. is given to us: a new principle and a new power within. We have new and godly desires and a new perspective on life and eternity. To be born of God is not to have all our problems solved or all our sinful tendencies removed. But it is to have the spiritual ability and desire to know God, worship him, and do his will. But with this profound change comes a new obligation to live as the true counter-culture that trusts and glorifies God.

The French have an expression that says *noblesse oblige*. It means “nobility obliges.” The point is that if we enjoy great privileges, we have great responsibilities, too. This is especially true of God’s children. How can a child of God live only for money or pride or pleasure? How can he permit anger to rule his heart? How can a true Christian be unfaithful or live dishonestly? How can one who has been forgiven harbor a critical spirit towards others? How can we have fellowship with darkness or participate in the shameful sins of the world? Yes, we become God’s children through faith in Christ alone: “To all who received him he gave the right to become children of God.” But it is by the lives that we lead that we show what family we belong to.

There is no greater distinction than faith in Christ, no higher privilege than to become a child of God, and no more profound change than to be born of God. Now we must live up to our calling by the grace and power God gives to his family. Peter writes, “Live such good lives among the pagans that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet. 2:12, NIV).