

**Eyewitness Sermon Series**  
***Children of God***  
**I John 2:28-3:10**  
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**April 18, 2021**

In 2010, there was a movie that came out called *Catfish*. I saw it on Netflix about a year ago, and it's a documentary about an artist who meets another young artist who is a fan of his on Facebook. The initial contact leads to the artist developing relationships with other members of the young girl's family, including her older sister who he begins to develop a romance with. After some time, he begins to feel suspicious about these people who he is communicating with on the internet and he decides to take a road trip to make a surprise visit to this family. As it turns out, it was one woman pretending to be all of these different people. Since that movie came out, the term "catfish" has become part of our 21st century vocabulary. It describes people like the woman in the movie who create fake identities on the internet and lure people into relationships. Of course, catfishing is a modern term, and the internet offers a new way to assume a false identity, but there have always been people who claim to be someone or something that they're not. I was thinking about catfish and catfishing because in the Scripture that we are looking at today, the writer is concerned with the subject of identity. He wants his audience to be confident about their own identity, and he is also interested in exposing those who have claimed a false identity. Let's go ahead and look at the Scripture that begins at the end of I John 2 and goes through 3:10.

**28 And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming. 29 If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him. See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. 4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or**

**known him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. 9 Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. 10 The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.**

Last week I pointed out that one of the main purposes of this letter is to remind the community about the original testimony and teaching that they had received from those who had been eyewitnesses to Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, and he wants to build their faith and confidence in what they have believed. One of their problems was that this community was experiencing some difficulty with false teachers. You probably noticed that the language in these verses is strong and may seem almost harsh, but one of the things that shows is that the elder is passionate and protective of these people he calls his "little children." He was fired up, and he was angry about these deceivers who were making false claims and introducing doubt and confusion.

The heart of the issue that we see in this passage is, who are the true children of God? Children of God is a term that we often use to describe everyone, as in, everyone was made by God and God loves everyone so in that sense we are all God's children. When we're using the term that way, there really are no distinctions between one person or group of people and another, but that is not how the term is being used here. In this passage, the author is using the term "children of God" to describe those people who have believed that Jesus is God's self-revelation and have entered into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus. That is the criteria the elder is using to determine the authenticity of their identity as children of God. Other people, like the false teachers, might be claiming to have special knowledge or some kind of special standing or relationship with God because they claim they are more enlightened or on some kind of different spiritual plane, but that does not make them true children of God in the sense that the author is using the term. If they are claiming to be children of God while rejecting God's self-revelation in Jesus and claiming to know God on some other terms, that makes them imposters and children of the devil. Again, that language sounds harsh to our ears, but he is using language and imagery that was familiar in the context, and he is not talking about whether God loves

these people but about whether these false teachers truly love God and have a relationship with God that comes through faith in Jesus.

So, in this passage, the elder assures these believers that they are truly children of God by telling them that they are, but he also talks to them about things that they can look to as evidence that will confirm their identity but will also expose the identities of the imposters. The telling sign boils down to whether a person sins and continues to sin or whether a person avoids sin and practices righteousness. Now, this criteria does seem tricky because everyone sins, and the elder even said back in chapter 1 that if we say we haven't sinned we make God out to be a liar, so it might not seem like this is a very helpful way to try to differentiate between who truly knows and has a relationship with God and who doesn't, but verse 9 gives us a little help.

In verse 9 the elder says that those who have been born of God do not sin because God's seed abides in them. This suggests that the author is talking about the rebirth and recreation that occurs in a person's heart when they are joined to Christ through faith. It is the new birth that Jesus talked about when he told Nicodemus that a person must be born again. When Nicodemus asked, how can a person re-enter his mother's womb? Jesus said, **“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.”** It is becoming new like Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5:17 when he says, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” There is something that actually happens to the spirit of a person when they are united with Christ. They become new, and this transformation is followed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, perhaps the “seed” that the elder refers to. As we know from experience, the Holy Spirit does not exercise such control in a person's heart that they can never choose to sin, but the Holy Spirit does exercise influence and influences the believer to keep in step with God and to turn from sin and embrace righteousness. And when the believer does choose to disobey, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to our fault and leads us to repentance. This is that process that the elder refers to in verse 2 when he says, beloved, we are God's children *now*, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. When we see him we will be like him? The spirit is made alive with Christ instantly, but becoming just like Jesus in our thoughts and actions is something that happens over time as we walk with him and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, and the bottom line for the elder is that a life that is united with Christ through faith, and a life that is in that process, will look different from the life

of one who is not united with Christ. The actions and intentions of those who are in Christ will not necessarily perfectly reflect Christ and Christ's righteousness, but there will be a consistency and an evident commitment to living righteously that is evident.

So, we have a passage about the children of God encouraging them to remember who they are along with a strong warning that not everyone who claims this identity is actually who they say they are. I have to admit that in some ways this passage makes me a little nervous because humans are so good at labeling, and dividing, and making judgements about other humans, and it does happen - I'm sure you've heard it - that people claiming to be Christians say "well, those people who claim to be Christians aren't *real* Christians." And let's not even get started on how good most of us are at figuring out how *other* people are guilty of sins all while turning a blind eye to our own. One could potentially take this passage and have a field day hunting down children of the devil. One *could* do that, but I don't think that's what the author was hoping to encourage. For one thing, that type of attitude is the attitude of someone on the offensive, and the author's position is defensive here. He is not encouraging the believers to go out looking for people to get into conflict with. The conflict has been brought to them, and he wants to help these Christians face the danger and conflict with strength and truth. When we understand that and remember that, then we do find help in this Scripture for times when we may need to be on defense, too.

Both threats that the community was experiencing - the temptation to doubt their identity and security as God's children- and the threat of being led astray by imposters- are things that any of us may feel at any time. We may feel insecure about our position as God's beloved children because someone tells us for some reason that we aren't. Maybe we didn't match up to their idea of the kind of person that God would love, or maybe they judged us for being where we are instead of being where we will someday be. Maybe we didn't have the special insight or relationship with God that they claimed to have, and for any of these reasons they may call your standing with God into question. Other times, maybe the insecurity or fear doesn't come from the outside, but it comes from the inside. Maybe we doubt or feel insecure about our identity as God's beloved children because we feel like our own failures have disqualified us. Or we think the thing that we did was too bad, or the fact that we can't get past a certain hang-up means we must not really be right with God. These kinds of things do and will come against us sometimes, and we can be encouraged in those times by the words of the teacher here. They are for anyone who has become a child of God through faith in Jesus. Through faith we are united with Christ

once and for all and nothing can take away or change our status as his beloved children. As Paul says in Romans, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

When it comes to the second danger, we may not experience it exactly as this community was experiencing it. There is not a group of false teachers trying to infiltrate our church right now with false ideas, but there are plenty of people out there who claim to have special knowledge or teach things about Jesus that are in conflict with what God has revealed about Jesus in Scripture, and this Scripture reminds us that they are there. Not everyone is who they claim to be, and not everyone who claims to have or to speak the truth has it. As Christians we should never check our brains at the door, but we should listen carefully and test the words of those who claim to be wise. We should look for the evidence of the living Christ in those who claim to know him and seek to have influence over us. We know not to look for perfection, but to look for signs that they are becoming and desire to become more and more like Jesus. If the Spirit inside of us signals "something isn't right here," we should listen to that and steer clear.

The Apostle of Love wrote to his friends because he cared for them and wanted to protect them, and we can take his words as assurance of God's love for us. Yes, we do live in a world filled with deceivers and accusers who don't mind if they cause harm, but as the children of God we have been equipped with wisdom and the Spirit of Truth. Amen.