

**Love and Light:
CHILDREN OF GOD**

I John 3:1-7

*Family resemblance carries
family responsibility.*

A sermon preached by
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Think about the darkest place you can imagine. Last week, Roy Beth talked about light pollution, and how light from cities can obscure our vision of the heavens. Think of a place so far away that there is no light pollution. Maybe far up into a mountain wilderness, or deep inside a cave. Or maybe you want to go beyond the solar system, into the vast darkness of outer space.

Until recently, scientists thought deep space was pitch black. But according to a new study in the *Astrophysical Journal*, scientists have learned that outer space, too, is actually filled with light! The discovery was made using a spacecraft called *New Horizons*, originally designed to explore Pluto. After reaching Pluto, the spacecraft journeyed beyond on the dwarf planet and is now four billion miles away from earth. This means *New Horizons* is far from any sources of light pollution. Deep in outer space, *New Horizons* helped scientists determine that the amount of light coming from unknown sources is equal to the amount of light coming from known galaxies. When they eliminated the light from known light sources, they discovered there was still plenty of unexplained light. Outer space is still pretty dark, but not as dark as everyone originally believed.¹ Wherever there is darkness in outer space, there is still light.

There is still too much darkness in the world. You can click off the list in your mind: disease, death, depression, despair, divorce, injustice, oppression, violence, human trafficking, substance abuse, human abuse—the list goes on far too long. It's tempting to think that the world is just a dark and horrible place. But the good news from Scripture today is that wherever there is darkness, there is also light. We are never without the light, and as the Gospel of John says, "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*"² The darkness of the world is overcome by the light of God.

The light in the universe is the love of God. Love is the fundamental essence of creation. Love is the character of the Creator. Without love, there is nothing; nothing exists without the love of God. That's where our Scripture text starts today—with the love of God: "*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we*

are.”³ We are called children of God because God’s love includes us in God’s family.

Then the words sound like the Gospel of John: “*The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.*”⁴ In his last prayer for the disciples, Jesus prayed, “*I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.*”⁵ Obviously, the same author is behind the Gospel and the Letters of John.

This is our present state of affairs. This is reality: “*Beloved, we are God’s children now.*”⁶ This means that life is controlled and defined by the love of God. We are living in the light of God’s love. Despite the darkness, life is not as philosopher Thomas Hobbes described it: “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁷ Life is good and sweet and wonderful and eternal, because we are living in the light of God’s love.

Being a child of God has several implications.

Being a child of God means we bear a family resemblance to God. Family members usually tend to look like one another. I have a habit, when I am relaxed, of standing with my hands on my hips. I’ve done it since I was a kid. It looks awkward, I know, but it’s comfortable. Last weekend, we went to Florida to see our grandkids and their parents, and I was watching my grandson Walker, who just turned ten, playing baseball. Between plays, he stood in the outfield just like I used to stand in the outfield—hands on hips. Family resemblance.

God’s children must be like God in some way. We are born with a connection to God, with an essential dignity and worth as a human being. In fact, Psalm 82 says, “*You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you.*”⁸ This divine seed is planted in us at birth, in every single person, and it is not erasable, not matter how far off the path a person may wander. We have an unmistakable family resemblance to our heavenly Father.

I’ve shared with you before one of my favorite stories from the late Fred Craddock, former professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology. Dr. and Mrs. Craddock were vacationing in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. They had just settled down in a nice restaurant for a cozy dinner when they noticed an older gentleman walking around to different tables in the

restaurant, laughing out loud and shaking hands and slapping backs. “Oh, great,” Fred thought, “A politician. Maybe he won’t come over here.”

In about five minutes, the old man stood at the Craddock’s table with his hand out and a smile on his face. When he found out that Fred Craddock was a preacher and a teacher of preachers, he pulled up a chair and said, “Hey, I’ve got a preacher story for you.” Dr. Craddock groaned on the inside, but continued to smile as the fellow told his tale.

He said, “I’m Ben Hooper. I was born not far from here across the mountains. My mother wasn’t married when I was born, so I had a hard time. When I started to school, my classmates had a name for me, and it wasn’t a very nice name. I used to go off by myself at recess and during lunchtime because the taunts of my playmates cut so deeply. What was worse was going to town on Saturday afternoon and feeling every eye burning a hole through me. They were all wondering who my real father was.

“When I was about 12 years old, a new preacher came to our church. I would always go in late and slip out early. But one day the preacher said the benediction so fast I got caught and had to walk out with the crowd. I could feel every eye in the church on me. Just about the time I got to the door I felt a big hand on my shoulder. I looked up, and the new preacher was looking right at me.

“‘Now who are you, son?’ he said. ‘Whose boy are you?’

“I felt the old weight come down on me. It was like a big, black cloud. Even the preacher was putting me down.

“But then as he looked down on me, studying my face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. ‘Wait a minute,’ he said. ‘I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You are a son of God. You have a great inheritance; go and claim it.’”

The old man looked across the table at Fred Craddock and said, “I was just a kid when that happened, but it changed my life. For the first time I didn’t see myself as the son of an unwed mother. For the first time, I began to think of myself as a child of God. And that made all the difference in the world!” With that the old man stood up, shook hands with the Craddocks, and continued greeting people in the restaurant.

The next time the waiter came by, Fred asked him, “Who is that man?”

The waiter replied, “Oh, him? That’s Ben Hooper. He used to be governor.” In fact, Ben Hooper, illegitimate child and adopted son of God, was elected twice to be governor of the State of Tennessee!⁹ We are children of God, and there is a family resemblance.

But the family resemblance carries a family responsibility. We are to act as if we belong to this family. I was not a member of a prominent family growing up, but my parents were proud of who they were and tried hard to be upright and responsible citizens. They raised my brother and me to be the same way. It was understood that if we belonged to the Reeves family, there were standards to be met. And the last thing we would want to do would be to do anything to bring dishonor or disgrace on our family.

When John writes about the family of God, he makes clear that children of God have standards. We should avoid sin. Sin is anything—word, thought, or deed—that is outside the will of God. Sin dishonors the family and God. Who we are—children of God—calls us to purity. “*All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*” If we hope in Christ, we want to be pure like he is. “*Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.*” Jesus came to take away our sins, and Jesus himself is without sin. Therefore, “*No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.*”¹⁰ Jesus is our model, and his life calls us to a life of righteousness.

This is very similar to an idea John Wesley had about Christians being perfect. Wesley believed that we could be made perfect in love in this life. We can’t be free from making mistakes, because we’re human. But we can strive for the goal to let every action—internal and external—be ruled by love. Christian perfection means being perfect in our love for God and neighbor.

As you can imagine, this perfection does not happen overnight. It’s not like a light switch that comes on when we become a Christian or realize that we are children of God. It’s a process. Wesley called it sanctification—

being made holy. John would call it purification, being made pure as Christ is pure. We might call it pursuing perfection in love.

If you have ever been to a Jewish temple or synagogue, you might have noticed a lamp of some sort hanging in the temple. This is called the *ner tamid*, or everlasting light. It represents the presence of God in the holy place, and it never goes out. The *ner tamid* is burning 24/7/365.

The *ner tamid* has a particular significance for Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, which happens in December. Hanukkah doesn't have anything to do with the Christian celebration of Christmas; it celebrates the bravery of the Maccabees, a Jewish family who threw off foreign rule about 165 years before Jesus. During the occupation by the Greeks, there was an evil king who set up a statue of himself in the Temple of Jerusalem. He demanded that the Jews worship him. The Jews, led by Judas Maccabeus, revolted and liberated Jerusalem from the evil regime.

However, when they tried to restore order to the Temple, they found that there was only one container of purified oil for the everlasting light. (Nowadays they are usually electric.) Normally this container would last a day. But the ritual process for purifying oil took eight days. Nevertheless, the Maccabees poured all the purified oil into the *ner tamid* and began to purify more oil. The miracle of Hanukkah is that the oil in the everlasting light lasted for the full eight days it took to purify more oil. So the everlasting light of God's presence never went out in the Temple in Jerusalem.¹¹

Today, Hanukkah is an eight-day Festival of Lights that commemorates the miracle of God's presence and the purification of the Temple. The point for us is that it takes a long time for the process of purification, but the light keeps burning while we are in the process. Being made perfect in love takes the rest of our lives, but God is present with us to lead us, guide us, and direct our steps along the way. Our best response is to stay on the path and keep taking steps toward our destination.

The good news is, we have a destination. **We have a family resemblance, and a family responsibility, and we are a family with a future.** The process leads to our salvation. We have a living hope. We are headed home.

We read this verse at all our funerals: *“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.”*¹² There is a life beyond this life that is yet to be revealed to us. It’s a heavenly home, promised to us by Jesus on the night before he died. It’s resurrection life, made possible for us by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Heaven is the end game for Christians.

There are many stories of people who have had glimpses of life after death. Maybe you have had one, too. Kent Millard is a long-time pastor and now president of United Theological Seminary in Ohio. He shared in a Sunday School lesson once about the death of his father from cancer in 1992. Shortly before he died, Mr. Millard opened his eyes and said, “I just saw my dad.”

Kent said, “Your dad died 30 years ago.”

Mr. Millard said, “Really? I was just with him over in that bright light. And I’m going to join him. But there are two of us going together. Who do you think the other person is?”

Kent suggested it might be his dad’s brother, Will, a younger brother who was in a hospital 1200 miles away, also suffering with cancer. His dad smiled and said, “Sure, Will is going with me. But I’m not going for two days.” Then Mr. Millard put his head on the pillow and with a smile on his face looked up into the corner of the room as if he were gazing into the light of eternity.

Two hours after that conversation, the family received a telephone call that Will had just died. Two days after that conversation Kent’s dad died. Thinking back, they realized that he had to wait two days because his oldest daughter was coming in from London and had trouble making connections. She came into his room about 9:00 p.m. They hugged, and they shared their love for each other. Then, about twenty minutes later, Mr. Millard breathed his last and entered eternity.

Reflecting on that experience, Kent Millard wrote, “Our family had always believed intellectually in life after death. After Dad’s pre-death experience and our conversation with him about it, we knew it to be a reality in our hearts.”¹³ That’s the future for a child of God.

There is too much darkness in the world. But no matter what sort of darkness you are facing today, remember this: There is also light. The light is the love of God. God's love includes us in God's family. We are God's children. There is a family resemblance. Our resemblance to God calls us to responsibility, to live a life of purity and righteousness, and God is with us to help us along the way. With God's help we will reach the future God has prepared for us. Ultimately, finally, victoriously, and gloriously, the light will overcome the darkness.

This is awesome. Say it out loud. This is awesome!

I am a child of God. Say it out loud. I am a child of God!

Thanks be to God! Let the church say, Amen!

¹ Samantha Tidball, "Light of the World," *Ministry Matters*, 1/6/21.

² John 1:5.

³ I John 3:1a.

⁴ I John 3:1b.

⁵ John 17:14.

⁶ I John 3:2a.

⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, i. xiii. 9.

⁸ Psalm 82:6.

⁹ Source unknown, but see the article on this story at *snopes.com*.

¹⁰ I John 3:3-7.

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanukkah>.

¹² I John 3:2.

¹³ William Reeves, "Children of the Resurrection," sermon preached April 13, 1997.