

Growing Up

In the name of him in whom we have become the children of God, dear friends in Christ: Our country is blessed to have citizens who had the foresight to preserve for posterity some of the truly great sights and natural wonders that exist in our land. They are now zealously safeguarded in our system of National Parks and Monuments; wonders of nature like Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, Zion and Bryce Canyons, Yellowstone and Glacier Parks, and the Carlsbad Caverns, to name but a few. And if you've ever visited any of these places you can understand what I mean when I say the first time you stand there and behold them in their glory, it literally takes your breath away. Over the years with my own family I've made a point of visiting some of these sites. And a few times while traveling with the youth to Higher Things Conferences, I've been able to share with our church's teens at least a glimpse of them.

One time in particular, on the way back from a conference in Utah, we swung through Yellowstone Park. After spending most of the day visiting several of the geyser basins, we took lodging in cabins near what's called the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. We had a picnic supper, and then I led the group down the half mile trail that took us over to the canyon. The trail wound through deep woods, so the kids had no sense of what we were approaching. They only knew they were going to see some river in a gorge. How spectacular could that be? Well, then the trail ends, we cross a road, and we're standing on the precipice; looking down nearly two thousand feet to the churning river below. Astonishment. Eyes popping. Jaws dropping. *Wow!* They just stand there absorbing the glorious panorama for about ten minutes. Then one of them notices that near the top of the huge waterfall way, way down there, are people looking like ants from where we are. "Hey, hey" he says to me, "Look! There must be trail. C-can we go down there?" "Well, sure. That's what we came for." "*Awwwwesome.*" And it was.

It still is. But there's nothing quite like the first view of a work of the Lord that magnificent. I'd been there before maybe ten times, so I knew what to expect. And while I still very much enjoyed seeing it again, it didn't have the same impact on me. I'd lost some of that sense of wonder. It occurred to me that people who live and work in places like that, who are continuously exposed to the same spectacular sights every day, must have an even more diminished sense of wonder. After a while, even the most beautiful sight becomes old hat: just a river in a deep gorge. I thought, wouldn't it be nice if there were a way to recapture and preserve the awe inspiring sensation of that first view?

And if that's true for great sights and natural wonders that the finger of the Lord has etched upon the face of the earth, how much more should it be true of the supernatural wonder of God's great love for us in Jesus his Son? This is where today's Epistle lesson begins. The Apostle John is marveling over our exceedingly exalted status as beloved children of the heavenly Father through faith in Christ. He's calling us to marvel with him: "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God; and so we are."

He's saying, stop. Back up. Look at it again as if for the first time. Recapture the sense of wonder. *God calls us his children.* In the boundless love and infinite suffering and sacrifice of Christ, he *makes* us his children. We don't deserve that. Through our countless sins and evil rebellion against God, we made ourselves children of the devil. We justly deserve eternal damnation. That's what we should get: nothing but endless suffering far removed from the Lord and his glorious light. He would be more than just to send us to hell forever and be done with

us. But no; amazingly, inexplicably, for the sake of a love incomprehensible to us for its vast scope and perfect purity, the Father sends his Son into this world to become one of us, to live a holy life on our behalf, and then to offer himself on the cross as the sacrifice of atonement; to take upon himself the punishment we so properly deserved. Why does he all do this? In order that he might lift us up from the shame and wretchedness of our guilt, cleanse us from all sin, make us holy, and declare us to be his beloved children and heirs of his eternal kingdom.

Friends, that such a staggering notion is true ought to take our breath away every time we hear it. Really? *Really?* God loves me like *that?* *Awwwesome!*

Sadly, that's rarely the case if ever for us. We've heard it before too many times. It's become old hat. The sense of wonder has diminished. Maybe it's gone. We're practically immune to seeing the glorious Gospel for the astounding miracle of grace that it is. But don't get me wrong: we *do* need to hear it daily and often, because it's precisely through the declaration of the Father's love and forgiveness for us in Christ that we become and remain his children. The problem is not that we hear the Gospel too often and have the love of God in Christ poured out upon us daily; rather it's that we don't value it as we should. We take it for granted, as if it were only natural, as if we deserved it. *That's* the problem. The key to renewing our appreciation for God's great love for us in Christ is to remember what we are and would be forever without it: condemned sinners rightly under God's judgment.

So start with what a terrible sinner you are. Examine yourself deeply and see the darkness within. Then you will see the wondrous love of God for you in the proper light. And you'll be more eager to hear those blessed words of absolution: how God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, and how for his sake you are forgiven. And on a day like this, when we celebrate Holy Communion, when you see people kneeling at the altar you'd say, "Hey, those folks up there are receiving Christ's true body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins! C-can I go up there and receive them too?" And the answer comes back, "Well, of course. That's what you came for." "*Awwwesome.*" And it is.

And too, with this better appreciation for how amazing it is to have been made a child of God through faith in Christ, you would better understand what it is you are expected to do as a child of God. What's that? Same thing every child is expected to do: grow up. No child wants to remain a child forever. They're eager to move up and on, to become what they were meant to be: fully mature adults.

This is precisely what the Apostle John goes on to say in today's text. Having renewed our wonder at being made God's holy children, he goes on to speak about what we will become. "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." He's saying that when Jesus Christ returns in glory, we will be like him: without sin, holy and righteous, our love made perfect as his love is perfect. That's what we *will* be. That's our hope and our goal. And growing up as a child of God means working toward that goal even now.

How do you do that? John has the answer: "Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." There it is: purification; filtering out what doesn't belong: tenaciously seeking out the sin within your own mind and heart and removing it through regret, repentance, confession, and the Word of Christ's forgiveness. It's this ongoing process that puts the sinful old nature to death and breathes fresh life into the new person: the maturing child of God. So we keep at it. With the help of the Spirit whom we have been given, and the light of God's Law of Love, we dig ever deeper into the dark places of our souls and root out what doesn't belong

there – the things that are not like Christ. That's how we purify ourselves and move from infancy to spiritual maturity.

And we must do this and keep at it diligently because there is only one other option. And that is to continue to practice sin. It doesn't make any difference how far you've come in the process of growing toward spiritual maturity. If you get to the point where you say, "I've come far enough", since you aren't yet perfect and pure as Christ is, what you're saying is that you're willing to put up with certain sins and allow them to continue to be part of your life. "I'm going to keep on practicing this sin", whatever it is. And do you know why people practice? It's to become good at doing what they practice.

This is why John says, "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness (that is, rebellion against God) ... [Jesus] appeared to take away sins ... No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen or knows him." Pay careful attention to what John is saying. If you are a child of God, you will naturally want to grow to become what God wants you to be: like Jesus. Indeed, if you know Jesus and his love, you will want to be like him. But if you keep on sinning, that is if you deliberately reject God's desire for you to grow in Christian faith and holy living, and you turn from the means by which he conforms you to the image of his Son, and if you purposely pursue your favorite sins with no desire to repent of them, you only show that like the devil, you are committed to your rebellion against God and do not know Jesus, his love, or his saving work for you. And if you don't know Jesus, you cannot possibly be God's beloved child. Do not fool yourself or let others lead you astray: if you persist in practicing sin, which is rebellion against God, you're only going to get better at it and get farther away from the Lord.

Thus St. John enjoins us to practice righteousness instead. How do we do that? We need to look at two aspects of this. First, that we recognize that we have no righteousness in ourselves. We can work feverishly at it all day long and we won't make ourselves a tiny bit more righteous than we were before. All we can bring to the table and present to the Lord is our sin. We do this by confessing it. He then imputes to us Christ's perfect righteousness. So, at the most basic level, we practice righteousness by repenting of our sins and receiving the righteousness God reckons to us in Christ.

But then on a second level, as we pursue more diligently the sin within ourselves and receive more of Christ's forgiveness, and as we grow in Christian faith and knowledge, Christ and his righteousness will become more evident in our words and actions. You might think of it like learning to play the piano. The first time a student sits down and attempts to play a challenging new piece that's beyond their present skill set, the results are going to be pretty awful. You might not be able to recognize the tune. But as the student continues to practice the same piece over and over again, with patience and perseverance, eventually the music will begin to sound like it's supposed to. And a good student will work especially hard on the most difficult parts until they get it right.

We are called as God's children to practice righteousness the same way: by seeking out and repenting of the sin within us with increasing diligence, and working especially on the hard parts; that is, attacking the sins we have the most trouble with. It's through this process that we mature in Christ, becoming more and more like him who in wondrous love saved us by his grace, and made us God's children. Therefore because this is the Lord's plan and ultimate goal for us, let us continue to press on to grow up in Christ until the day comes when our heavenly Father finishes the work and makes each one of us the perfect image of his Son. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!