

God's Children Now

April 15, 2018

Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of reader]

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. 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, and all who have this hope in him purify themselves just as he is pure. Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness. Sin is lawlessness. You know that he has revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 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.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thank you very much, Leslie, for covering for my mistake [laughs]. Artisan would not be much if there weren't a lot of people around covering for my mistakes. See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God. That is what we are. See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God. That is what we are. Try it with me.

[Voices in unison]

See what love the Father has given us.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

This is one of those breathtaking verses in scripture (there are a few) that are so rich and powerful that we could sit and meditate on them, just thinking about the meaning of one verse for as long as it would take to have a normal sermon. And it would probably be as good or better just allowing it to blossom and spread its beauty through us. "See what [voices together] love [Scott] the Father has given us that we should be called children of God" speaks to the unfathomable love of God, the incomprehensible gift of our salvation. A gift so great that the only way we can begin to comprehend it is through a collection of metaphors which we can find

in the scriptures. And there are many many metaphors in the scriptures for the ways that we are saved by God. Metaphors about being washed clean, metaphors about being redeemed, purchased out of slavery, about becoming citizens of a new country or subjects of a new king. Metaphors about going from being no people at all to being God's very people. Metaphors about being reborn, about being made new, about being transformed, about undergoing a metamorphosis. Metaphors about being poor and then receiving riches, or about having all of our debts cancelled. Metaphors about being healed from the disease of sin, about having our guilty sentence overturned and our punishment commuted.

So many images in scripture that describe for us little pieces of what it means to be saved by God's grace. And yet this one today, this one about being God's very children, might be the closest we have to literal — the least metaphorical — because that is what we are, God's very children. See what [voices together] love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God. Beloved, we are God's children now. Imagine not having a family and then suddenly finding yourself part of a family, a royal family. Being the child of the monarch who loves you as much as they love their very own children, because that is what we are. As the Apostle Paul said, we are his very offspring. This first verse in our passage today, First John 3:1, is so joyous because it reminds us of who we once were and of the fact that we now find our identity in the very family of God. No matter what family we came from, how jacked up it was, how much pain and suffering and evil there might have been in it, we find a welcome in a new family as the children of God. Beloved, we are God's children now.

And we could say amen and take communion and sing a couple songs and go out of this place with the joy of that great truth ringing in our ears and in our hearts and in our minds. But John doesn't stop there. We don't have just one verse from this epistle assigned to us by the lectionary today, we have seven verses. And what comes next is very interesting, and we might want to change the emphasis a little bit. Have you ever done that exercise where you have a sentence and you emphasize different words in turn and you see how the meaning of the sentence changes depending on what you emphasize? I've been reading this is as, "Beloved, we are God's *children now*," as if that's our arrival point. Because that would be a pretty good arrival wouldn't it? It's an incredible place to be. We're a part of God's family — Amen, go home.

But what if you emphasized it like this: "Beloved, we are God's children *now*." That might kind of imply that this is just the beginning. Because it is just the beginning. That's what he goes on to say right afterward in this text. He goes on to say what we will *be* has not yet been revealed. We're God's children *now*. That's pretty great, but what we're going to be, he seems to be saying, is even better. And you can't even see it yet, you don't even know what it is, we don't

even know what it is. What we do know is this, he says, "When he is revealed, we will be like Him for we will see him as he is and all who have this hope in him purify themselves just as he is pure." What does this even mean? How could we improve on being children of God. What would it look like? And what is this business of being like him when he is revealed to us, seeing him as he is? It's rather confusing. The truth is I don't actually quite know what he means. It sounds to me like one of those things that's too beautiful to describe. Theologians talk about how we live in this state of tension. They call it the "already not yet." You've heard me say that sometimes, right? The saving work of Christ has already been done but it has not yet completely overtaken every aspect of our life and of our world. Already not yet — I think that might give us a little bit of a clue of what John might be talking about here.

You might remember if you were here in the beginning of March when Reverend Dominique Gilliard was here talking about rethinking incarceration. He used this explanation that really hit home for me that the world is in a state like Holy Saturday. We Protestants don't do Holy Saturday very much, but we have Good Friday which is the crucifixion, we have Easter Sunday which is the resurrection, and what were the people doing in between? They were disoriented and confused and sad and angry and maybe felt alone and abandoned. And that's the way the world feels sometimes. We heard it in our prayer time. That's the Holy Saturday time of prayer. Christ's saving work, the atoning sacrifice of the crucifixion, has happened but we haven't witnessed the fullness of God's work in the resurrection yet. I think that might give us a little bit of a clue as to what John is talking about. We're God's children now, but what will be hasn't even been revealed.

Or how about this one. We'll go back a little bit farther in time. Saint Severus of Gaza. You all remember Saint Severus, right? Sure you do [laughs]. The patriarch of Antioch? Ringing any bells? The head of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the sixth century? Saint Severus, you remember him, right? Yes *that* Saint Severus, thank you. [Audience laughs] Thank you, yes [laughs]. He said it like this: "We are striving toward the likeness of something even better. We shall be fashioned according to the brightness of the resurrection." I still don't know what that means but I love the poetry of it so much. It feels like I got a little bit closer to it. "We shall be fashioned according to the brightness of the resurrection." I hope it's OK that I don't know what all this means. But I do know that whatever it means and whatever we will look like, and whatever he will look like in whatever new revelation will happen, when the mysteries are all explained...I do know that we are God's children now and being God's children now means we have a special calling on our lives.

Hear the rest of that passage. The part where John says, "No one who abides in him sins. No one who sins has either seen him or known him." Where John says, "Everyone who commits sin

is guilty of lawlessness because sin is lawlessness.” Wow, that is a big downer that came out of nowhere, didn’t it? We started out with this lovely and kind bit about being God's children — he even calls us beloved. Then we learn that we had something even better to look forward to, something so much better that it defies description or explanation. And even Mr. Fancy-Pants-Seminary-Degree can’t even figure it out. And then when we hit this wall the whole thing is ruined. All this talk about sin and law and lawlessness and we don't even know who Jesus is, apparently, if we sin. I'm pretty sure that disqualifies all of us from knowing who Jesus is because, if as John says, everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness then lock me up and you all are coming with me, and hope they have a big paddy wagon.

But hang on. Let's take a look at what this might mean, all this talk of lawlessness. I want to try to do a little bit of work here with the language because I think all we need is a is a very simple exercise, OK? This is what we need to do, it’s very simple. We need to take a quick look at that English word and see that it's based on a Greek word (the book is written in Greek). That Greek word was itself based on a Hebrew word that was representative of something much bigger than the specific definition of the word, right? So it couldn't be more simple. It's rather obvious when you think about it, isn't it? Well I am teasing you but actually, I'm quite sure you can take this little etymological journey with me. It’s only a few a few steps and I think it will maybe shed some light on what's happening in this passage, particularly at the end of it.

So that word lawlessness, when we see it in English we have a sense of what it might mean. It comes from a Greek word “anomia.” And when we break that down very quickly, the Greek root is “nomos” which means law. And the prefix, the letter A — “a-nomia” has made its way into English in some ways. You might not know this, but think of the word immoral. Somebody who is immoral has very corrupted, bad morals, correct? Someone who is amoral has the absence of morality, good or bad. Do you see the difference there? So that little prefix “a” means without something; it's absent. So anomia means lawlessness, literally being without the law, OK?

Now, though this book was written in Greek it was written to a Jewish audience. People who understood the language of Scripture. And the word nomos, that Greek word for law, is how they translated a very important Hebrew word from the Jewish scriptures, from what we call the Old Testament, and word is Torah. Now you might have heard the word Torah before. Torah can mean either the first five books of the Bible, specifically the books of Moses; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But Torah also is used kind of more generally to mean the entire collected writings — the law of the prophets, the wisdom literature. It's the collected wisdom of the religious teaching of the Jewish faith: Torah. That's the Hebrew word that turns into the Greek word nomos, which turns into the Greek word on anomia which we

translate into lawlessness. Are you still with me? How many are sleeping right now? Raise your hand if you're sleeping [laughs]. We're almost there. Because we need to think about what Jesus said about Torah.

Being a rabbi, a Jewish teacher, what did he say about Torah which the disciples then wrote down as nomos which we get as law? Well even early on in Jesus' teachings there were some rumbling that he was chucking Torah out because of some of the ways he talked about it, because of some of the ways he talked to the experts in the law, because of some of the things that his disciples did that you weren't supposed to do if you were strict observers of Torah. And so Jesus sits down to teach in the Sermon on the Mount and one of the very first things he says, I think probably anticipating this criticism that's about to come his way because of what else he says in the Sermon on the Mount (is), "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets (the Torah). I have not come to abolish them but" — what did he say, Bible nerds — "but to *fulfill* them." Wow, you guys are Bible nerds. That's a good type of nerd to be. It's better than like a Dungeons and Dragons nerd or something I guess [audience laughs]. So a lot of you are both and I'm sorry. Man I did, I don't know my audience for how they just felt.

But Jesus is saying, don't think that I'm here to wipe out the law. I'm actually here to fulfill it. I'm here to fulfill nomos, not to wipe it out. And what did he mean by that? What else did Jesus say about the law? Do you remember the occasion when the person came to him and said, "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in all the law?" And Jesus said to him, "The first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, with your mind, and the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself." Now both of these came from the Torah, the Jewish law. He said these are the two most important things in it. In fact, he said even more than that. He went on to say this: All of the law and the prophets, all of the writings, all of Torah hangs on these two commandments; Love God and love your neighbor. So when Jesus says he's not here to abolish Torah, the law, nomos, but to fulfill it, what he means is that he's going to show us that love is the fulfillment of the law. You can obey Torah by doing two things, loving God and loving your neighbor. The definition of the law is love. So the definition of lawlessness, anomia, which we get a little bit later in the story from first John, is the failure to love.

John seems to be saying if you're not loving God with all you've got and you're not loving your neighbor as yourself then you are without the law. Because the law is love and you are clearly not abiding with Jesus when you fail to love, because Jesus showed us again and again and again and again and again what it means to love to the fullest extent. And why should we love? Not because it's our legal obligation to do so, not because not because there's some law on the books that says do this or you'll be punished in this way. We should love because of who we

2018-04-15 *God's Children Now*

are. "See what *love* the Father has given us that we should be called *children of God*." That is what we are, that is *who* we are. We are God's children now. Already we are God's children. But just wait for what we will become when all of the mysteries are revealed, when all the tears are wiped from every eye. We are welcomed into God's family as God's own children because God loves us, wants to lavish love on us so that we can carry that love into the world and lavish it on other people. So we have no other sensible option than to love God back and to love our neighbors, and to love our enemies because that's the law.

Will you pray with me. Blessed Jesus, you showed us in your teachings, in your life and your death, what it means to love. That there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. And we saw in your resurrection the triumph of that love over all the powers of evil and darkness and death. In this season of resurrection as we celebrate Easter tide, may we get glimpses of that triumph in our everyday life. When we see death and destruction, when we see crucifixions of those we care for, of that which we have held tightly to, of our hopes and dreams, and we know on that Saturday that Sunday is coming. May we know that we are God's children now and what we will be is so beautiful that is not been revealed and we cannot understand it. Give us courage to press on toward that goal even when we cannot see it or know it. Raise us to life as you were raised to life, we pray. Oh Christ, in your name, Amen.

I want to invite you now to receive Holy Communion, both a symbol of Christ's broken body and his shed blood. And also the real presence of the Savior; food for our hungry, tired, weary souls. And our table is open, meaning that everybody who is seeking to abide in Jesus to travel the road toward love because it's his command welcomed at this table. And you can come and receive this by taking a piece of the bread, dipping it into one of the cups and you can eat it right here at the table. May it be food for your souls, may it be an act of remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, and may it be an act of unity with each other. Knowing that when you take this bread and this cup with your siblings in Christ that you are united as one together in the Savior's love. If you prefer not to take communion you can sit and observe, meditate or pray. If you'd like to receive personal prayer the prayer team member will be at the back of the room happy to pray with you. The band will come, we'll sing a couple more songs together, you can get your children and have them take communion. or go get them after you're done, that would be fine too. But our table is open, let's continue to worship God as the spirit leads. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com