



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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Our Father's Love
1 John 3:1-3

Today is, of course, Father's Day, that time when we honor and show our love and appreciation for our fathers. In expressing our appreciation, we often think and talk about all that our fathers have done and continue to do for us.

But isn't it appropriate that on this special day we think not only about our earthly fathers, but even more about our heavenly Father? I mean, think about it. Time would fail us to recount all that he's done for us in creation and in redemption, much less how he sustains and watches over us day by day. So this morning, I want us to focus on "Our Father's Love."

Our text this morning comes from 1 John 3:1-3. Listen to what John said . . .

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 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. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.¹

Amazed by God's love

That's a beautiful expression of our amazement at God's love for us, isn't it?

Have you ever been truly amazed at something?

Years ago, my family and I were vacationing near Massanutten in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. When we started our trek back home to Fairmont in Robeson County, we decided to swing a little out of the way to see a sight we hadn't made it to during the week—the Natural Bridge. It was worth the ride!

When we arrived, we of course had to go through the obligatory gift shop. But as we left the shop and made our way up the creek, we went around a bend and looked up. I was awestruck! There, towering over a big creek, was this massive *natural bridge*, hewn out of the rock over thousands and thousands of years, so rock solid that a local highway ran across it, yet so beautiful and astounding. As we stood there looking at it, in amazement I had to say, "O God, how awesome you are!"

That awe was even greater when we visited the Grand Canyon some years later. And we still feel it when we go over to the mountains of western North Carolina and East Tennessee, or to the beach looking out over the ocean.

But as awesome as the wonder of God's creation is, it pales in comparison to his amazing love.

Do you see here in our text how John called his readers to marvel at the Father's love, at *what kind of love* it was—a love that calls believers **children of God**? To make sure they understood just what he was saying, John offered additional emphasis: **and so we are!**

This call to marvel understands that the magnitude of God's love is beyond human comprehension. We can neither understand it nor fathom it; all we can do is marvel at it!

Through the centuries, preachers and theologians and laypeople alike have tried to describe God's love. One of my favorite descriptions is the final stanza of Frederick Lehman's old gospel hymn "The Love of God." He had heard an evangelist at a camp meeting quote the words that form that last stanza and had written them down. They had been found written in pencil on the wall of a room in a mental institution. While it was originally assumed that the patient who had died in that room had written these words in a moment of sanity, they were actually based on the Jewish poem *Haddamut*, written by Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai in the year 1050.²

Could we with ink the oceans fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.

Indeed, *God's love amazes us!* It astonishes and astounds us! When we realize that God the Father has loved us in such a way that he has made us *his children*, all we can do is stand back and marvel at it! All we can do—the only proper response—is to *worship* God our heavenly Father!

Distinguished in the world's eyes

Now the early Christians, even while reveling in God's love, often experienced suffering and persecution at the hands of the world—sometimes from people in the culture around them, sometimes from Jewish leaders, sometimes from the Roman government. Here John reminds them that there was a good reason for that—the world didn't know them, because it didn't know God!

In the ancient world, people thought in terms of "like knowing like"; in other words, a certain kind of person would have knowledge of the same kind of person, but not of another kind, or a person from one class or station in life could understand another person from the same class or station, but not those from another.³

It was a little like the distinction that folks in the military or law enforcement today sometimes make between themselves and civilians. There really are some things about that group or culture that you just can't understand if you're not a part of it.

Here the difference is between those who are related to God and those who aren't. Those who aren't don't know those who are, because they don't know the God to whom they're related. They can't understand them. They don't know why they live as they do or why they do what they do. And the reason they can't and don't is because they don't know God and therefore don't know and can't understand his children.

So what's the significance of all this? Isn't John's point that *our Father's love and our resulting relationship with him distinguish us in the world's eyes*? They know we're different,

but they don't know us. When we follow our Father's ways, our ways are foreign to them. They don't understand us or who we are or what we do or why we do it. But they do know that it has to do with our relationship with God.

Paul uses in his letters the language of *sanctification*, of being set apart by God for his purpose to describe this. Peter uses the language of being *foreigners and strangers* in this world. And the writer of Hebrews uses the image of being on a *pilgrimage*.

The point of all these images is the same—our Father's love makes us *his children*, and because the world doesn't know our heavenly Father, it doesn't know us!

If our sights aren't set right, all this can be discouraging for us as Christians, and John seemed to understand that.

What he went on to say to his readers reminds us that believers are *already God's children now*; this isn't something we're waiting for in the life to come. It's already a *present reality*—we are the children of the God who created the universe! God is *already* our heavenly Father, and we are *already God's children now*.

Our hope in Christ

Now what this means for the life to come—*what we will be*—has not yet been fully revealed. What we do know is that when he is revealed, ***when he appears, we will be like him***, because then ***we shall see him as he is!*** And the implication is that this will be even better than being God's children now!

John describes this belief as having *hope* in Christ.

Hope can be a powerful force that sustains us and keeps us going. We often hear people say in times of grave illness, "Where there's life, there's hope."

Now hope in the biblical sense isn't just a desire for good things to happen. In the Bible, hope has to do with confidence and expectation about the future. The fact is that in spiritual matters, instead of "Where there's life, there's hope," we believe that "Where there's hope, there's life!"

Hope is so vital, and our Father doesn't leave us lacking here. *His love gives us hope for this life and for the life to come!*

To know that we're already God's children gives us confidence in whatever we face in this life—the confidence that God will watch over us and see us through, no matter what.

And to know that when Christ appears we'll be like him is to know that we'll be with him and share in his resurrection and glory throughout all eternity. What a hope!

Transformed by love's hope

Now this hope that's grounded in and grows out of our Father's love is a *formative force* that actually *transforms us*.

John wanted his readers to know that this hope wasn't just some wonderful thoughts to think, that it wasn't just a "pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by" attitude. He emphasized the *effect* that this hope should have on believers: ***All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure*** (NIV®, 2011 edition).

John said here that when believers are confident that they will be like Christ when he appears, even *in what they don't yet know* about him, they will strive to be like him now *in what they do know* about him—that ***he is pure***.

One of the things that's often so lacking among Christians is the determination and effort (by God's grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit) to become *like Christ*. John says here that

when we begin to grasp the incomprehensible magnitude of our Father’s love, it will have such a tremendous impact that it will transform us. As God’s children, we’ll want to be like Jesus *now*, just as we know that we’ll be completely like him in the future. Nothing will motivate us in this any more than standing in awe of his amazing love.

The hymn writer Isaac Watts expressed it so well in the final stanza of “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all!

Do we really feel this way? Are we really seeking to purify ourselves, just ***as he is pure?***

What John says here is so profound, yet it’s so simple! He called his readers to marvel at the Father’s love and to understand its implications for their lives. Simply put, *our Father’s love amazes us, distinguishes us, gives us hope, and transforms us.*

So hear it once more . . .

See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God—and we are! For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know him. Beloved, now we are God’s children, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that when he is revealed, we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.⁴

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®.

² http://tanbible.com/tol_sng/sng_theloveofgod.htm (accessed 3/9/2015); also <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/l/o/loveofgo.htm> (last accessed 6/12/2017).

³ I first heard of this concept in the ancient Mediterranean world in my studies with Dr. Charles Talbert. He discusses this idea in a number of his commentaries on various New Testament books.

⁴ My translation.