

BE WHO GOD SAYS YOU ARE**1 JOHN 2:28 – 3:10**

Sometimes finding out who you are can be a big surprise. Jay Speights recently discovered that he's royal. He took a DNA test and the results revealed he's of royal descent in the West African country of Benin. The thing is that Speights grew up in New Jersey. He's a pastor in Maryland. He and his wife live in an apartment. He doesn't even own a car. But now he's a prince. He visited Benin and was welcomed home as royalty. When he first arrived, he saw what looked like a festival going on with hundreds of people dancing and playing instruments and singing. It took him several minutes to realize it was a welcome party - for him. Because he had no experience in being a prince, the royal family of Benin sent Speights off to a so-called prince school to learn how to be a prince. He learned local customs, visited dignitaries and various local sites. Speights got the full royal treatment. He was given white lace robes to signal he's now considered to be a holy man, a guard was posted outside of his door while he slept, and local paparazzi followed him around during the day. He was also given a new name: Videkon Deko. The new name means "the child who came back."

KISS: Keep It Simple, Saint is the message series title. Following Jesus doesn't need to be complicated or confusing. It's simple and straightforward. John kept bringing up three tests or marks of spiritual authenticity for followers of Jesus. They were valid back in the 1st century. They're still valid in the 21st century. The first test was doctrinal accuracy. Get Jesus right – who He is and what He did. The second test was growth in a godly lifestyle. If you claim to be a follower of Jesus, your attitudes and actions should reflect Jesus to others. The third mark or test was loving God's people. Let's read a section of I John just now. See if you can guess which of those three tests or marks John focused on. This is about that second mark or test of spiritual authenticity – growth in a godly lifestyle. It's really a word of encouragement for Jesus' followers to be who God says we are. Above all, we are God's children. What all that means might be a surprise to you. Growing in a godly lifestyle means living into that truth and living out that truth. So, you're God's child? Great! Then, be who God says you are! What do we learn from this passage of God's Word? First...

GOD'S CHILDREN EXPERIENCE A SPIRITUAL BIRTH.

John introduces a wonderful truth for the first time in this letter. "Everyone who does what is right has been born of him.... No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God." (1 Jo. 2:29, 3:9 NIV) That same concept showed up in another book he contributed to the New Testament: the Gospel of John. Do you remember Jesus' conversation with a man named Nicodemus? Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." (Jo. 3:3 NLT) Every person is born physically into a human family. Some of those people – but not all of them - are then born spiritually into God's family. Physical birth results in a physical, earthly life. Spiritual birth results in a spiritual, eternal life.

How does this spiritual birth take place? John explained it in his Gospel. "To all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God." (Jo 1:12-13 NLT) Contrary to popular opinion, we are not all children of God automatically simply because we're human. The Bible never teaches that. In fact, no one starts out as God's child. True, God has given all people physical life. But being our Creator and being our Father are two very different relationships. We all know a man can help create a child, but never stick around to be a father. God has to become our Father and we have to become His children. How? It happens when we acknowledge our need of a Savior, we put our trust in what Jesus did for us, we repent of our rebellion against God, and we invite Jesus to be our Boss. That's when the Holy Spirit comes to live in our human spirit. We become God's sons and daughters from that moment on. The rest of life is about being who God says you are.

Even though this truth of spiritual birth wasn't new for John, he's struck afresh and anew by the sheer wonder of it all. He wrote, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 Jo. 3:1 NLT) He can hardly believe it himself! We are God's children right now today, not in some distant future. None of us had anything to do with our first, physical birth. Likewise, none of us really have anything to do with our second, spiritual birth. Yes, we did have to approach Jesus by faith – true enough. But we didn't somehow earn or deserve being adopted into God's family through our good behavior, or betting baptized, or joining a church. And now we've been brought into this new, marvelous relationship with the God of the Universe! Yes, just like any earthly parent, our Heavenly Father has rightful authority over us, but He's never a tyrant. We have new and eternal access to His loving care, His provision, and His protection. Equally wonderful is the fact that once God becomes your Father, He stays your Father for all eternity. Oh, yes, we can ignore Him, disappoint Him, fail Him, and treat Him badly. But if He is truly your Father, you will come back to Him, repent, and ask that the relationship be restored. And your Heavenly Father will always gladly take you back.

Be who God says you are. If spiritual birth means anything, it means there's hope! It means you're very special to God. It means you can change, you can grow, and you can gradually become the person you long to be. It means one day you will look and act like Jesus and you will live and reign with Him forever and ever. Talk about a wonderful hope! It's a hope that carries us through all the years of our lives - through dry times, difficult seasons, and disappointment with ourselves and others. It's a hope that sustains us both in our struggles with the personal sin in our own lives and also the brokenness of this world. That life - that hope - can be yours, only if you have been born again spiritually through faith in Jesus Christ. It's not about self-improvement. It's not about gritting your teeth and trying harder. It's about being who God says you are. But how do we get and stay motivated to be who God says we are? Don't miss the motivator John revealed and wanted us to access.

GOD'S CHILDREN ARE MOTIVATED BY JESUS' SECOND COMING.

In one verse, John used two distinctive words to describe Jesus' Second Coming. "And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming." (1 Jo. 2:28 NLT) "Appear" or "appearing" is the same word he used back in the first chapter when he wrote, "This we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared..." (1 Jo. 1:1-2 NIV) That specific word describes the invisible becoming visible - something hidden being revealed. For thousands of years, God was there but couldn't be seen. He was hidden, so to speak. But in Jesus, the invisible God became visible. He could be seen, heard, and touched. Someday, John said, He will be visible again. He'll be fully revealed, and then, John went on to say, "we will see him as he really is." (1 Jo. 3:2 NLT)

The second word John used is "coming" – "so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming." (1 Jo. 2:28 NLT) That word was used to describe a king riding into one of his territories to be welcomed and honored by his subjects. In the ancient world there were no TV images of the king on the nightly news, no photographs to look at, and no YouTube videos of his latest speech. Most people lived their whole lives without ever actually seeing their king. So when a king actually visited the city you happened to live in, it was a rare and glorious event. People would line the street – "Look, there he is! That's him!" Sometimes they'd even go out to meet him, join his entourage, and accompany him into the city.

John wanted us to have no doubt that the very same Jesus who was brutalized and humiliated on the cross would one day return in power and glory for all the world to see. His first readers needed to know that. They were two or three generations removed from Jesus' first appearance. They'd never seen Him. They needed to know that one day, Jesus would come again to be seen and heard and experienced. And we need to know that, too. We're some 50 generations and 2,000 years removed from the physical, earthly Jesus. It's hard to believe, sometimes, that God really walked this planet in the person of his Son. It's harder still to believe He will come again to Earth to be seen and heard by all people everywhere. But John wanted to assure us. It will happen.

John's description of the Second Coming is positive, inspiring, and motivating. He wanted us to look forward to that day, he said, "confident and unashamed." When I was growing up, it seemed like Jesus' Second Coming was more a source of fear, not hope. It was all about Armageddon, and the Antichrist persecuting Christians, and maybe being left behind. I knew the Second Coming was supposed to be a good thing, but it inspired more fear than hope in me. How do you feel about the Second Coming? Does it fill you with hope or with fear? If that's what you are – a child of God - then you have no reason to fear His coming. On the contrary, look forward to it! But notice I said *if - if* you are a child of God...." That's a big "if." If you've never been born again – spiritually born of God - the Second Coming is indeed a scary proposition. So, are you ready to meet Jesus, if He should come back today?

John wanted us to look forward to that day with great joy and anticipation. We've all seen those pictures or videos that show a military family standing on an airport tarmac,

waiting for their father to step off a troop transport, home from war. As soon as he appears, the kids rush toward their dad, throwing themselves with joy and abandon into his arms. And then, having hugged him as tightly as they can, they lean back and just look at him. They want to see him just as he is: his wonderful face, his big smile, his loving eyes. In much the same way, if we're children of God, we look forward to Jesus' return. We don't have to worry about being "left behind." We don't have to run for cover. We'll welcome Him. We'll behold Him. We'll see Him just as He is. Be who God says you are, child of God! There's yet another aspect of what that means here.

GOD'S CHILDREN PURSUE SPIRITUAL PROGRESS, NOT PERFECTION.

What does that mean? How can I pursue spiritual progress (a realistic, achievable goal), but not pursue perfection (an unrealistic goal I'll never achieve this side of Heaven)? Well, it means I don't continually, habitually keep on sinning. If you like everything to be black and white with very little gray, you will like John. Not much nuance with John! You're either in the light, or you're in the dark. You're either living the truth or living a lie. You either love the Father, or you love the world. You're either a child of God or you're not. In v. 4-10 of chapter three, he said some pretty stark things about the presence of sin in our lives. "Anyone who continues to live in him will not sin. But anyone who keeps on sinning does not know him or understand who he is." (1 Jo. 3:6 NLT) At first glance, it sounds like John believed and taught real Christians stop sinning altogether. If that's true, I'll be the first one out the door today giving up any personal effort whatsoever to follow Jesus!

But I don't think John contradicted himself. Back in chapter one, he told us if we claim to be sinless, we're liars. He also said when we do sin – not if - we need to confess it to God so He can forgive it. Here's where the original Greek helps us. John constantly used the present tense of the verb "to sin" in these verses which can have the meaning to keep on sinning continually. He clarified his earlier statement like this, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God." (1 Jo. 3:9 NLT) John isn't saying real Christians never sin. He's talking about habitual behavior, not occasional lapses. He's not claiming God wants perfection from us, but He definitely expects progress. Can a genuine follower of Jesus sin? Of course! Can a genuine Christian commit a willful, deliberate act of sin? Sure! Can someone who is born again and indwelt by the Holy Spirit live a life dominated by continual, habitual sin? Absolutely not!

Is a person a Christian if he or she lives like a Christian is supposed to live, but hasn't accepted Jesus as Savior? We'd probably say no, but there might well be a question mark in our minds. How about a person who claims to believe in Jesus, but his or her behavior gives no indication that he or she is actually following Jesus? We'd probably need to put a question mark on that case, too. True, only God knows when a person crosses the line of faith and becomes His child. It may not always be evident to us. It's good to remember John didn't write this letter so we could point fingers and pass judgment on each other. He wrote it so we would know whether or not we ourselves are

authentically Christian, and how we can experience a more genuine walk with Jesus. But the bottom line is no mystery. It's more than just knowing about Jesus; it's becoming more like Jesus. It isn't just about information; it's about transformation.

So, what does it look like to pursue spiritual progress, but not perfection? It also means, I truly want to become like Jesus. The Holy Spirit puts in the hearts of God's children a sincere desire to become like Jesus. That's one evidence you really are a child of God. If you have a sincere desire to be like Jesus, but you still fail occasionally, that's one thing. But if you could care less about being more like Jesus – it's just completely irrelevant to you – that's something else altogether. It's likely you've never been born again by the Holy Spirit. An authentic, genuine child of God wants to be like his or her Father. You want to be and become who you are.

All kinds of self-improvement stuff is out there. Just go online or visit your local bookstore. You'll find titles like *Personal Development for Dummies*, *Reinventing Yourself*, *Becoming a Life-Change Artist*, and even, *Change or Die*. There's a 500-page book entitled *Building the Best You: A Two-Year Discovery Journal*. If you don't want to wait that long, you can pick up a much thinner volume that promises to *Change Almost Anything in 21 Days*. It all sounds so simple and promising, but is it really possible? Maybe. Self-improvement is one thing. Becoming more like Jesus is another. It's a combination of the Holy Spirit's work in you and some personal effort as well. I think the Bible captures the process well when it says, "Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him." (Ph. 2:12-13 NLT) He gives us both the desire and the power to be who God says we are.

What does it look like to pursue spiritual progress, but not perfection? I find ways to spend time with Jesus intentionally. How do you spend time with someone who isn't here on Earth physically? You can't experience Jesus with your eyes or your ears. You can't reach out and touch Him physically today. As you read and meditate on God's Word, you spend time with Jesus spiritually. It happens when you actually apply the Bible to everyday decisions and choices. It happens when you pray. It happens when you worship. It happens when you gather with other Jesus' followers to pray, to discuss Scripture, and to serve others. After all, Jesus said, "For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them." (Mt. 18:20 NLT) Becoming like Jesus isn't about gritting your teeth and trying harder. It's about getting closer. The more you're with Him, the more you will be like Him. Be who God says you are.

What does it look like to pursue spiritual progress, but not perfection? Here's a final thought. I will become like Jesus, but gradually. There's a kind of inevitability about it, if you are truly God's child. John put it like this, "Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is." (1 Jo. 3:2 NLT) When you're someone's child, you resemble them. You can't help it. You carry their DNA, for one thing. There's an inevitable family likeness.

There's a study out there of a pair of identical twin boys who were separated at birth and raised by different families about forty miles apart with no knowledge of the other's existence. At the age of 39, they met each other for the very first time and discovered some remarkable similarities. Both of them had been named James by their adoptive parents. Both liked math and hated spelling. Both of them were married twice, first to women named Linda, and the second time to women named Betty. Both had sons they named James Allen. Both of them owned dogs named Toy. Both were chain-smokers and smoked the same brand of cigarettes. Both had high-blood pressure. Both drove Chevys. Both worked in law enforcement, and both vacationed on the same beach in Florida! Pretty amazing, yes?

Family likeness. It gets passed on from one generation to another in ways we don't fully understand. Once you've been born of God, you have the life of God within you. You will be like Him. If you are a follower of Jesus, you're destined to be like Jesus. It's in your spiritual genes, so to speak. It's who you are. John put it like this, "Since we know that Christ is righteous, we also know that all who do what is right are God's children." (1 Jo. 2:29 NLT) When you're born again by the Holy Spirit, it's like you get the "righteous" gene then and there. You've inherited this capacity, this inclination, for doing what's good and doing what's right before God. Of course, we still have this broken, sinful, old nature inside of us. So, this side of Heaven, it's always going to be a struggle to be like Jesus and it's always going to be a gradual process.

But the fact remains that right now today becoming like Jesus isn't just a possibility, it's a promise. John said exactly that right here, "But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is." (1 Jo. 3:2 NLT) Not just a possibility, but a promise. And not if, but when. This will happen finally and completely when? When Jesus returns. Someday you and I are going to see Jesus face to face. In all His glory. And then we will be like him. We will become the people we long to be. The people we were born to be when we were born of God. And that gives us a profound and certain hope. It reminds me of one of my favorite verses in the Bible, "I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns." (Ph. 1:6 NLT) We will be then fully and completely who God says we are now today.

I heard about a high school teacher who taught a class in sociology. Let's call him Mr. Jones. That's not his real name, but the story about him is true. Mr. Jones' class was one of the most popular ones at that high school, because everyone who took the class got at least a B. On the first day of class, Mr. Jones would look everyone in the eye and say, "My job is to teach you sociology. And that's what I'm going to do. We're going to cover a lot of material. There will be two tests—a midterm and a final. But I promise that if you show up for class and you do the few things I ask you to do, you will get a B or better." For obvious reasons, he had all kinds of slackers take his class. It seemed impossible some of his students were going to get Bs. They'd never gotten a B in their lives! But day by day, Mr. Jones walked and talked his students through sociology. And day after day, those kids came to class and did what he asked. And sure enough,

everyone in the class got a B or better. Do you see what happened? The promise of getting a B inspired and motivated them. Even the slackers showed up for class and did their homework. So, in the end, Mr. Jones didn't just give his students Bs; they actually grew into their Bs. They became what Mr. Jones told them they would be! In the same way, Jesus promises you and me that if we will just stay with Him, if we'll keep showing up and doing what He asks, we will become the people we long to be and were born to be. Not just a possibility, but a promise.

As we finish up this morning, I'd like you to consider where you might put yourself today. Have you ever invited Jesus to be your Savior and Lord? Have you been born again by the Holy Spirit and become God's child? Nothing happens until that happens. If you have done so, are you becoming more like Jesus every day? Not perfection, but progress. Are there steps Jesus wants you to take that will get you moving toward the abundant life God has in mind for you? Let's think about that for a minute, and then talk to God about it. God absolutely wants you to become who He says you are. The question is – do you?