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John 1:12-13

Rest, Renewal & Grace:

Finding my Identity as a Child of God

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Today I want to share a passage I was meditating on during sabbatical. I started reading the gospel of John and for a while, I got caught up on these two verses.

John 1:12-13 (ESV)

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

These verses caught my eye because they talk about Christians being identified as children of God. I wrestle with what it means to be a child of God. Do you know what that means? Do you get it? Other pastors tell me all the time how important this is, and how identifying as children of God can make a huge difference.

I went into sabbatical really wanting to experience what it means to be a child of God. See, I don't believe everyone is a child of God, only people God adopts into his family. But just because I know a "theological truth" that "I'm a child of God" through faith in Christ doesn't mean I really get it in my heart.

Unfortunately, I can't say I figured it all out on sabbatical, but I want to share a few things the Lord is teaching me. Three words help us find our identity as children of God: blood, flesh, and will.

1a) I'm not a child of God because of my blood.

I'm sorry if you're squeamish about blood, like I am, but the passage talks about it. "...he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood..." I won't be showing you any pictures of *ER* or *Grey's Anatomy*. My mom used to like watching those shows when we had an old TV that had lots of static and the color wasn't very good. When we got a high-def television, she didn't like them as much. Too much blood! Blood may be kinda gross, but it's also really significant for identity.

Remember who wrote this book. Jesus' disciple John wrote the gospel of John, one of Jesus' most beloved disciples. He's Jewish, but he's writing the gospel of John to a mixed audience made up of Jews and Gentiles, non-Jews. In the verse right before ours, John says the Israelites rejected Jesus and then adds, "But to all who did receive him." One of John's most important messages in the gospel of John is that "all" or "whoever" believes in Jesus receives eternal life, whether they have Jewish blood or non-Jewish blood.

That's a complete turn of events because for over a thousand years the story they've been living has been all about blood. Back in Deuteronomy 14:1 God identified the Israelite people as "the sons of the Lord your God." The Israelites were to be one blood. The sign that marked all males as Jewish was a sign stamped in blood, circumcision. The Israelite people, and Jewish people today, still find a lot of identify and security in believing they are children of Abraham and God's chosen people. But John is saying you're not a child of God, or Abraham, because of your blood type or mark made in blood but through faith in Christ Jesus.

I was able to make progress on my Doctorate of Ministry (D.Min) this summer. One of the people helping keep me accountable is Pastor Nathan Willems, the English Pastor at CBCGL. We've been reading each other's chapters and encouraging one another. His project is about second-generation Asian-Americans and identity formation. He's now the English pastor, but he was the Youth Pastor for many years, and found that

children of immigrants, second-generation immigrants have a difficult time figuring out who they are. Am I Chinese? Am I American? Am I Christian? I feel out of place. In his paper, he shares this quote from the book, *Becoming Asian American*:

One of Meg's most vivid early memories, from when she was about 8 years old, was that of a group of neighborhood children, primarily white, following and harassing her as she walked home from school. They pulled their eyelids up to make fun and chanted racial slurs. When Meg got home, her parents comforted her. Besides advising her to ignore the attacks, they also emphasized that she should take pride in her Chinese ancestry: "They told me not to pay any attention, that the kids were just ignorant and mean. They also told me that I was Chinese, it was in my blood, it wasn't something to be ashamed of. It was one of the few times they actually talked about it, but I think it was really important to them that we be proud of being Chinese."

Maybe you can relate to that. You find a lot of identity in your Asian blood, your American blood, your New England blood (also known as Dunkin blood), or your family's blood. I find a significant amount of identity in being a Romig, son of Paul and Ellen, brother of Christy, Timothy, Matthew, and Nathanael. But here, in this text, Christians can find a new way to identify themselves. And if you're someone who has struggled with ethnic or family identity, here's a new way to identify yourself, as a child of God.

We're born, not of human blood, but of God. "But to all who did receive HIM, who believed in HIS name, he gave the right to become children of God." Whose the "him?" Who do we receive to become a child of God? Who do we believe in to get this new identity? Jesus! I'm not a child of God because of my blood...

1b) I'm a child of God because of His blood.

These two verses, 12-13, tell us that we "become children of God . . . not by blood, flesh, or man, but by God." So you have to kind of back track and ask, how does God make us his child? By his blood, his flesh, his man. I'm a child of God because of Christ's blood on the cross, ultimately, because of God's blood.

We've been in the book of Acts for a while, and are going back next week. And one verse that really stuck out to me describes God bleeding for us. Paul says, "Care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." (Acts 20:28b ESV) God, through Christ Jesus, spilt his own blood on the cross to save us from our sins so that whoever believes in him can receive eternal life but also be adopted into a new family.

God's blood, through Christ's blood, doesn't just save us, it transforms our identity. No longer are we foreigners and aliens to God, but his beloved children. The blood of God covers us on the cross. What is one of the primary rituals Jesus gave all believers to remember him, and form community? Communion, the Lord's Supper, where he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:25b ESV) He wants us to remember his shed blood, to symbolically internalize his shed blood, and for our identities as believers and as a church to be defined by his shed blood.

When you put your faith and trust in Christ Jesus, Christ's blood covers you, not just cleansing you from sin, but giving you a new identity as a child of God. You can still find identity in your Asian American blood or European American blood or African American blood or Romig blood, but as Christians, the blood of Christ gives us eternal identity that far surpasses anything this world offers. I'm not a child of God because of my blood, but because of His blood, and his blood covers me through Christ.

2a) I'm not a child of God because of my flesh.

John says we don't become God's children through the "flesh." Nothing the Jewish people or the Gentile people could do with their bodies could make them children of God. When we think about identity

formation, we often think about what we do, don't we. What's the first thing people ask you when they meet you? What do you do? I'm a pastor. I'm a civil engineer. I'm a teacher. The Jewish people also found a lot of identity in the things they did, especially obeying the law of God. God gave them lots of rules to follow back in Exodus through Deuteronomy, and those laws gave them a lot of identity. But John says there's nothing you can do in your flesh that will make you a child of God, no rule you can follow, no law you can keep.

You might have had a father or a mother or teacher or significant authority in your life who insisted we acted or behaved a certain way. They could have insisted on good things, like doing your chores, your homework, being polite, etc. And each of us probably discovered that when we did those things, our parents or parental figure seemed happier with us. What we did in the flesh really mattered for the day to day relationship with them. Some of our parents did a good job of assuring us that they love us no matter how we behave, but some did not. Here's the dark side of all this.

I can come to believe deep in my soul that my heavenly father feels the same way about me. That he only loves me when I'm obeying him. And pretty soon you and I begin to live under a constant raincloud of feeling like we're always disappointing our heavenly father. Maybe he does love us, but in kind-of a frustrated way. Do you ever feel that way? I feel that way all the time. But here's the thing, I'm not a child of God because of my flesh, because of the things I do in the body.

2b) I'm a child of God because of His flesh.

Before Jesus started his ministry, before he multiplied the fish and loaves and walked on water, before he proved he wouldn't fall to Satan's temptation, the father said this about Jesus: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17b ESV) Before Jesus ever accomplished the mission his father had given him, his father said how much he loved him, and that he was "well pleased" with him.

When we believe in Jesus, we become identified as being "in Christ" (Romans 6:11, 8:1; 2 Corinthians 5:17). In Christ, I've already lived a perfect life of obedience. In Christ, I've never ever disobeyed. In Christ, I'm not a disappointment, but the greatest glory. In Christ, my heavenly father also says of me, "This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased."

I know that can be hard to hear. I struggle to hear it because I want to prove myself. I also argue back. Yeah, but we're supposed to obey (John 14:15). Yes, but we obey not in order to win love, but as a response to love. I love my son and my daughter and I hope they'll obey, but their lack of obedience does not make them any less my child who I absolutely adore. There's nothing I can do in my flesh to make myself any more or any less his child than I already am.

The verse after ours says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." (John 1:14a ESV). God recognized that in our own flesh we're not enough, which is why he came. We're not just not God's children, Paul actually calls us "children of wrath" (see Ephesians 2:1-10). God didn't just come to save us, but to make us his children, to adopt us into his family. How he did that was by putting his flesh on the line. But once he laid down his flesh on the cross through Christ Jesus, our very identity changes. And the question becomes, do I identify more as a "child of God" or as a "child of wrath?" Part of believing the gospel is learning to identify more as a child of God, no matter what I feel inside. I am a child of God because of his blood and his flesh and his will.

3) I am not a child of God because of my will but because of his will.

John talks about "the will of the flesh" and "the will of man." If I trust in Jesus, there is nothing I can think or will that makes me any more or less God's child. If I can only have a pure thought life, then God will love me. False. God loves you as his child and is helping change your thought life. If I can only get the mental

help I need, then God will love me. God loves you no matter your mental health. If I can only have the right goals and aspirations, then God will love me. Wrong, God loves you because you his child, because you love his Son. It was the will of God, his will, that you would be his child.

On sabbatical I also read the book of Job. The book of Job is the story of a really successful man losing everything. He loses his family, his wealth, his wife's love, and his friends' support, his happiness, his joy. And we're led to wonder if Job will curse God and die. But instead, Job chooses to trust in God, the mighty God who made the heavens and the earth and the underworld itself (Job 26). And by the end of Job, God shows up and says how he made the earth and the sky and the rain and the seas (Job 38).

I was sitting on top of Mt. Avalon in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, close to Mt. Washington, just looking at the side of a mountain covered it lots and lots of trees. God reminded me that the one who made all of that loves me. This summer I saw the mountains of Colorado, the mountains of New Hampshire, the Atlantic ocean along Cape Cod, and I heard deep in my soul that it was the will of the one who made all of that that I would be his child. And if you know Jesus, the creator of the mountains and the oceans, your creator, it's his will that you would be his child too.

God calls you his child and there's nothing you can do about it but believe in Jesus.

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...” There is some sort of deep paradox here. You can't win God's favor through your blood, your flesh, or your will. God loves you and adopts you into his family. You believe because you've received and yet you also believe to receive. It's as we believe in Christ and wrestle with our identities that we come to know we are God's children. Maybe today's sermon message helped, but maybe you're just more confused than ever.

Here's what I'm doing. There are a couple of things I pray for on a semi-regular basis, and one of those things is that I would know deep in my soul that I am a child of God. Sometimes I pray that for my family too. If you wrestle with finding your identity as a child of God, then add it to your prayers. Pray it for yourself, for your family, and for your church family, including your pastor. *God calls you his child and there's nothing you can do about it but believe in Jesus.*

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen via [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to be a child of God?
2. Do you identify yourself as a child of God? Why or why not?
3. How do blood, flesh, and will tell us about being children of God.
4. How do we become children of God? Is it something we're born with?

Take a moment to pray to identify as a child of God.

Sources

[Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American*](#) (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 42. *Thank you Pastor Nathan for giving me permission to reference your D.Min project.