

We have two children, a five- and three-year-old, and I'm really thankful to God for my kids. For one thing they keep me humble. All fathers and mothers, I think, hope and pray that they can raise their kids to be kind and well-mannered. Christian parents do their best to teach them to be forgiving and unselfish, which is a pretty tall order to expect from little ones. I mean, how much time have we had to practice this ourselves, and we struggle all the time?

But for some reason we seem so surprised when our children act up, when they say or do embarrassing things in front of others. We'll talk to them afterwards and say something like, "*My dear, sweet child (ahem), that is not good behavior; and it certainly is not the way I taught you to behave.*" You might not even notice it when you say it, but I've caught myself many times where my primary motive for these talks is more for my own benefit, not theirs. My anger flared up I think more than anything because they're my kids. They're supposed to represent me, but instead they embarrass me some times.

They keep us humble alright. Our children can remind us that we haven't been perfect examples for them, either, which might be why they tend to make bad choices from time to time, also. They might even remind us of our relationship with our heavenly Father, who really has said to us, "*My dear, sweet child, that is certainly not the way I taught you to live.*" We think we get embarrassed over an ill-mannered child – imagine how disappointed God might be with us!

And we want to be better children, to live lives that show everyone around us how grateful and proud we are to be God's children. We want every choice we make, every word we speak, everything we do to give glory to God, to be a reflection of how good and gracious he has been to us. And the reason we want those things is because he has made us his children – children whose whole heart, soul, strength and mind are lavished with his love. He's held nothing back and promises us even more. How wonderful it is to be God's child, right?

That's what the Apostle John said, too. "***How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!***" When he wrote this first letter to the churches in Asia Minor, he was warning against the false teachers who were saying that the Christian faith wasn't enough. It was too simple and elementary. These wolves were trying to scatter the flock by raising doubts. "*Come on, now! Sure you can call yourselves God's children, but if you really want to know your Father and be more like him, then you have to look beneath the surface of all these 'stories' about Jesus. Do you seriously believe that God's Son would actually die on a cross to pay for your sins? Tsk, tsk, tsk – we thought you were more spiritually perceptive than that.*" In other words, faith in the gospel message wasn't enough for salvation.

But John was saying, "*Yes, it is enough, so don't listen to those worldly types who like to listen to themselves talk or to those circles of higher learning that reject the message you learned from me. And I learned it first-hand from Jesus himself!*" He wanted to direct their focus and faith, not to his own thoughts and ideas, but to the power and love of Christ. "*That's why we are named 'Children of God,'*" he says. "*That's why we carry the title of 'Christian' and represent our Father. Because of Jesus, we are God's children.*"

That means you, too, and all who believe in Christ as the Savior of the whole world. The thing is, though, God's children aren't supposed to have an easy and trouble-free life, either. And I could only imagine what the world thinks of us who follow a God who, by the way, lets you suffer from time to time. "*What kind of a father is that?! Oh right, the wise and loving kind.*" If they're being generous, some might say that our Christian faith is 'unique,' in that the way to heaven is all God's doing and not by us earning or working for it. But I'm guessing that 'unique' is not the word most would use. How about 'intolerant' or 'hateful' for suggesting that Jesus is the only way, truth and life?

So how wonderful is it to be called children of God again? "***And that is what you are,***" John writes. And the fact is, your Father has shown you how to deal with the children of the world who condescend and reject the faith that is so near and dear to you. He reached out to you and me, didn't he? We were children of the world, too, dead in our trespasses and sins. But God our Father intervened and reached out to us. And he wants his children to follow his example by reaching out to others – even to those who hate us.

Because you are children of God. It's not like our Father is saying, "*Just go around the mountain and avoid the rough and dangerous spots completely.*" He's actually telling us to go right through it all, to face it head on! But

to remember that through it all he holds us by the hand and even carries us when it gets too rough for our weak and feeble bodies and hearts. ***“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”***

Do you know who you are by now? Being children of God is definitely a challenge, because of all the flack we get from the world around us. At the end of verse one, John says the world doesn't know you or how wonderful it really is to be a child of God, because ***“it did not know him.”*** When Jesus walked the earth, preaching and teaching and doing miracles, many people saw and heard him with their own eyes and ears. And yet they didn't really know him. They didn't believe that all that he said and did was for the sole purpose of saving their souls. They didn't believe he was from God, we're baffled as to how they could possibly miss it. But many did miss Jesus; they rejected him. And it's no wonder, then, why the world still rejects you and me.

I don't know if understanding that fact makes it any easier for you, but I get frustrated sometimes. I know that God revealed himself to the world through his holy word. He's told us what he always planned to do and how he went ahead and did it just as he promised. Even the greatest story tellers and novelists of today would never have been able to concoct a story-line like we find in the Scriptures. And because it surpasses human understanding and imagination, it doesn't make sense to the children of this world. Why would God send his own Son to rescue a world of sinners who hated him? It's foolishness to the minds of this world, and even to the sinful nature that still lurks within us.

Being rejected by the world – it's not easy to accept, but it's understandable. I think what's even more confusing and frustrating is that we know who we are (God's children), and yet we don't always look like it. Like Paul said, we know the good we ought to do, but we just don't do it all the time. The evil we try so hard to avoid, well, that's what we end up falling into more than we'd care for anyone else to see. But guess who always sees it, even when we don't. And when we realize how filthy and disgusting we must be in the eyes of our Father, how heart-breaking and disappointing we must be to him – how could he ever want us back.

And he tells us to repent, to confess our sins to him, to put our whole faith in his Son's payment for our sins, and to make better choices next time. And so I'll think to myself, *“Okay, I'm God's child, I'm representing him, so I've got to try harder to do the right thing.”* But for some strange reason, no matter how hard we try to do the right thing, no matter how sincere we are in our attempts to obey our Father and represent him well, 'something' happens. That's what my son used to say when something went wrong, *“Something happened.”*

And when something keeps happening, and it's our own grievous fault, and the world around us says, “Just give it up instead of beating yourself up all the time. Didn't you say, Being God's child is supposed to be wonderful?”

It's no wonder why we can feel so frustrated and confused sometimes, not so wonderful. It's not because our Father has let us down or broken his promises. It's not because we were duped into believing the impossible. And it's certainly not because he has withheld his love from us in any way. But when we turn our focus from our Father's perfect love and power, it automatically shifts to you-know-who. And it's not a pretty picture, because we are weak and sinful. We are proud and disrespectful to our Father, too often thinking we don't need him or that it's really not so wonderful being his child. Like the unfaithful son in Jesus' parable, we have even thought how much better off we'd be without our Father. And when we see how foolish and ungrateful we have been toward God, we wonder how our Father could ever forgive us for what we've done.

Brothers and sisters, you are still his children. Because of Jesus, you always will be. And even though it's hard to see that truth in the mirror, it is perfectly clear in open arms of our Father. He didn't just stand there tapping his foot, waiting for us to come groveling back to make up for our wrongs. In the parable Jesus used, he shows that his Father actually came *running* to you to embrace you. He ran to you and sent his Son to live a life of sinless obedience, to become that perfect Substitute for the whole world, even you and me. And when he bled and died, God declared the whole world not guilty. Through faith in his death and resurrection, God gives us the right to be called sons and daughters of God. He ran to us, to assure us that he has always loved us and always will.

We are children of God, and we want to make our Father proud. Because he has lavished his awesome love on us, we are filled with his peace and power. Let his word and sacrament fill you with that love continuously, setting aside precious time to be with your Father. You can let the world know what it means to be his child as you walk confidently with your Savior by your side, following him and trusting in his power and love to support and strengthen you through this life. And one day when Christ our life appears, we will be like him glorified and free from sin and death of this world. Thanks be to God for the victory that is ours! We are children of God – how wonderful is that!