

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 6, 2009**

THE REASON JESUS CAME

1 John 3:1-8

Do you know this man? He was born in Italy nearly a thousand years ago, in 1033. He spent much of his adult life as a Benedictine monk in a monastery in Normandy. At the age of 60, in 1093, he became the archbishop of Canterbury in England, where he died 900 years ago this year, in 1109.

He is famous for his credo of “faith seeking understanding,” professing his conviction that “unless I first believe, I shall not understand.” Faith, he believed, is essential to understanding the doctrines of the Christian faith.

He is famous as well for his formulation of what is known as the ontological argument for the existence of God. Ontology has to do with the question of existence or being. He argued that God is “that than which nothing greater can be conceived,” and his purpose was to prove that God does exist in reality.

I’m speaking of Anselm of Canterbury, one of the foremost theologians of the medieval Christian church. He is most famous not for his ontological argument or his credo of faith seeking understanding, but for his book *Cur Deus Homo*, or “Why God Became Man.” In it he presented what is known as the satisfaction theory of the atonement. Anselm wrote that the death of Jesus on the cross *satisfied* the wrath of God for our sin. Our sin, he said, is an offense against God’s honor. In violating His laws, we have violated God’s righteous honor. In His death on the cross, Jesus took our place – His death was *substitutionary* – and made restitution or recompense to God for our sins.

Why did God become man? According to Anselm, to make satisfaction to God by paying the debt of honor and obedience we owe to God but can never pay. How did Jesus do it? By taking on our humanity in the incarnation, by living a sinless life and offering Himself as a substitute for us in His atoning death on the cross.

Calvin and the Reformers would add that in His suffering and death Jesus took upon Himself the punishment we deserve for our sins. As it says in Isaiah 53:5:

He was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities.
The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him,
And by His wounds we are healed.

In the next verse (53:6) it says:

The LORD has laid on Him (Jesus)
the iniquity (sin) of us all.

Peter expresses it this way in 1 Peter 2:24:

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree,
so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.

In *The Message* it says:

He used His servant body to carry our sins to the Cross,
so we could be rid of sin, free to live the right way.

Do you get the point? Not only did Jesus make restitution to God and satisfy the honor of God we offended by our sin. Even more. He made atonement for us by taking upon Himself – in His body – the punishment we deserve for our sin. For our rebellion against God and His righteous laws.

Why did God become man? Why did Jesus come? The Bible gives us the answer in several different places. In fact, the answer is given twice in this passage we read in 1 John 3. But before we look at that, there are three other points of great importance in this passage I want you to see.

1. THE GREATNESS OF GOD’S LOVE

Notice first what John says in verse 1 about the greatness of God’s love: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us.” When it comes to His love for you and me, God is not stingy. He doesn’t ration it out in small doses, like swine flu vaccine, as if there is only so much to go around. He doesn’t use it as a kind of bargaining chip, offering to show us His love if we meet certain conditions. He doesn’t make His love contingent on our achievements. No! He lavishes His love on us. As Anselm might have said, God loves us – each one of us – with a love than which no greater love can be conceived. You can’t imagine love any greater than the love God has for you.

In Ephesians 2, Paul says that because of the great love with which God loved us, He took us from spiritual death in our transgressions and sins, and made us alive with Christ (2:4-5).

Later in 1 John, in 1 John 4:9-10, John says: “This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son (Jesus) into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Listen to that: *HE LOVED US*. And to demonstrate His love, He gave His Son to die for us. For our sins. For our salvation.

There are millions of people in the world today who feel unloved. There are children who aren’t sure if their parents really love them. There are adult children who have never felt or known the love of their parents. There are tons of people who have gotten the message that they would be loved only if they measured up to some standard of achievement or goodness. Am I talking about you? Some of us live with the fear that if other people really knew us, if they knew our fears and failures and all the things we struggle with in life, there is no way

they would love us. So we do our best to hide the truth about ourselves and we put on a happy face to give the impression that we've got it all together. But we know it's just a façade.

Everybody longs to be loved. And we all long to know we are loved. Here comes John, and he says: "Do you have any idea how much *God* loves you? Do you have any conception of how lavish, how rich, how abundant His love really is? And do you know that He loves *you*?"

Do you know that? Do you know that God loves you? Personally? Do you know that He will never stop loving you? Paul says in Romans 8 (these are familiar verses) that nothing – not death or life, not time or circumstances, not the forces of hell, nor anything else in the whole universe God has made – *nothing* can stop God from loving you. *Nothing* can come between you and the love God has demonstrated for you in the life and death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (8:38-39).

You are loved. God loves you. And that will never change. Embrace the love He has lavished on you. Embrace it today. And never let go. Your Father in heaven will never stop loving you.

2. WHO WE ARE: THE CHILDREN OF GOD

Notice second what John says in verse 1 about our identity. Not only does he say that we should be called children of God, he says that is who we really are.

Not everyone is a child of God. I am a Smith by birth. I was born into the Smith family. By birth, I am the son of Roger and Arlene, and the brother of Gary, Mark and Lisa.

But I am not a child of God by birth. And neither are you. You do not become a member of God's family by physical birth. Being baptized doesn't automatically make you a child of God either. Nor does taking communion or becoming a member of the church.

How, then, does one become a child of God? In a word, by adoption. As an expression of His lavish love for us, in accordance with the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:3-8), we have been adopted by God into His family through faith in the saving work of His Son. The Gospel of John explains it this way: "He [meaning Jesus, the eternal Son of God who became flesh and blood, and came into our world] was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (1:10-12).

Children of God. Not by birth. Not by human ancestry or pedigree. Not by virtue of any human decision or achievement. But by adoption. By God's free, loving, and sovereign choice.

Children of God is what we are, as John says. Through faith in the Son and what He did for us on the cross, we have received adoption into God's family. Once we were not the children of God. Now, in Christ, we *are* God's children.

A question: Are you a child of God? Do you have assurance that you have been adopted into His family? If you believe in the name of Jesus, if you have received Him by faith as Lord and Savior in your life, then you *are* a child of God. If you are not sure where you stand, I urge you to settle the question of your relationship to God today by coming to Him in humble faith and placing your trust in the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ for you.

3. THE NATURE OF SIN

Third, notice what John says about the nature of sin. In verse 4 he says that the essence of sin is lawlessness: "Everyone who sins," he says, "breaks the law. In fact, sin (*hamartia*) is lawlessness (*anomia*)." *Anomia* is defiance toward God and His law. It is rebellion against God and His right to rule as sovereign in our lives. The spirit of lawlessness says that the rules which apply to others don't apply to me. Or, that I am free to make up my own rules, regardless of what God has to say.

Sin is not just out there in the world somewhere. Sin is not only a problem in the lives of other people. Almost a century ago the *Times of London* asked several prominent writers to contribute columns on the question "What's wrong with the world?" One of the writers, G. K. Chesterton, famously composed this response, brief and to the point:

Dear Sirs:
I am.
Sincerely yours,
G. K. Chesterton

Chesterton understood that the problem with the world is us. And the problem with us is sin. In Ecclesiastes 7:20, Solomon rightly recognized that:

There is not a righteous man on earth
who does what is right and never sins.

That is why we need a Savior.

When John says in verse 6 that no one who lives in Christ keeps on sinning, he does not mean that true Christians do not sin or will not sin or cannot sin. He has already said in 1:8 that if we claim to be without sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. Then in 1:10 he says that if we claim to be without sin, we make God out to be a liar, and His word has no place in our lives.

Are Christians sinless? Are you kidding? Of course not. We all stumble in many ways, as James says (James 3:2). We all miss the mark and fall short of God's glory (Romans 3:23).

John's point is that there is no place for a persistent, habitual, rebellious pattern of sin in our lives as followers of Christ.

Sin is a serious problem which requires a radical solution. Which is the reason Jesus came.

4. WHY JESUS CAME

So, why did Jesus come? John gives us the answer twice:

Verse 5: "He appeared so that He might take away our sins. And in Him is no sin."

Verse 8: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."

What is the work of the devil Jesus came to destroy or render ineffective?

- The devil's chief work is his own lawlessness, his own sin, his own rebellion against the righteous rule of God in an attempt to overthrow God and set himself up as Lord of all.
- In his rebellion, he tempts others – us – to doubt God, to disbelieve God, to turn away from God and go our own way.
- In the words of Jesus Himself in John 8:44, the devil is "a liar, and the father of lies." When the devil lies, Jesus said, "he speaks his native language." Lying is what he does.

The devil is a formidable foe. But, as Luther said, "his doom is sure." The devil is a loser. Jesus defeated him at the cross. He is a defeated enemy. He is not without power, though, and he still persists in his rebellion against God. But the day is coming when God will give him what he deserves.

Why did Jesus come? He came to put the devil in his place and to take away our sins. Only Jesus could do it. Nobody else could do it, because nobody else – nobody in the whole universe – is without sin. And only one who had no sin could pay the penalty for our sins.

In coming to us at Christmas, in His incarnation, He who had no sin became a sin offering for us – He took our sins upon Himself – so that we could be made right with God. That is the reason Jesus came.

Isn't that a great reason – the right reason – to celebrate Christmas?

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.