

Believe, Imagine, Work

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who paid the price for our salvation, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

One of my favorite things about Christmas is our Christmas auction. I love the fellowship and the fact that we make raising money to help needy people so much fun! We laugh at and with Dean and Eldon as they model women's scarves and try to figure out what to do with some of the items donated. (SLIDE) I've always been impressed with how much Mark's fish or Barb's peanut brittle go for. They usually end up way above my budget... I read a story this week about an auction where every item was auctioned off for much more than the normal market value. For example, the winning bid for a rocking chair valued between \$3,000 and \$5,000 was \$453,500.00. A used automobile, valued between \$18,000, was sold for \$79,500. A set of green tumblers, valued at \$500, sold for \$38,000. A necklace, valued at \$500, went for \$211,500. For four days articles of common, ordinary value were sold for wildly inflated prices. Why? (SLIDE) The items auctioned were from the estate of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. The value of the items at the auction were sold on the basis of the one to whom they had belonged.

It's the same for you and me. You and I may appear to be very ordinary to people around us, but God sees us as having ultimate value. (SLIDE) Enough value that God gave His Son for you and for me. Don't let anybody tell you that you don't matter. Don't let anybody rob you of your identity. Identity theft is one

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of the fastest growing crimes in America. Somewhere between 9 and 15 million Americans are victims of identity theft each year. You click on the wrong email or link in a text message and the next thing you know someone is ordering food from Dashlane in Kansas, where you've never been... True story...

Beloved, you are children of our Heavenly Father. God's own adopted child—that's what you are. That's your first and primary identity. The bright shiny baubles of this world, the temptations thrown at you by the Father of Lies, the Devil himself, and even your own self-doubts all try to steal your true identity from you. The Devil whispers in your ear that you're not good enough to be a child of God. He keeps reminding you of your past failures and goading you into future sin. He promises you wealth, fame, power, health, and ultimate happiness, if only you put aside the trust you have in Jesus and rely on your good looks, your good behavior, or your substantial retirement fund.

In our scripture reading this morning the author of First John reminds us who and whose we are. Can you imagine the love God must have for us?

(SLIDE) I love dogs and I take mine to the vet for all their shots and for regular check-ups. Imagine you found a stray dog, obviously infected with rabies. Would you bring the stray into your home? Would you give a rabid stray dog the run of your home and let him sleep in your bed? No, of course you wouldn't! We are

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like that rabid stray dog and God has brought us into his house. That's only a tiny amount of the love God has for you.

There are 3 things we can get out of this scripture reading for today. First, we can start to believe it. (SLIDE) We have been given the faith to trust in the promise of Jesus Christ. In His suffering, death, and resurrection we are adopted into the family of God as God's sons and daughters. We haven't earned the right to be called children of God. Rather, that title has been bestowed upon us by God himself. It's a free gift from God who lavishes us with love beyond measure.

The second thing we can glean from this scripture reading is we can imagine what it will be like when we are fully with God in eternity. (SLIDE) The author of First John says what we *will be* like when we see God face to face has not been revealed to us. There is so much that God has left for our imagination! What will it be like in heaven? Will there be beds and pillows and houses and streets and cities? Will there be gardens and trees and rivers and seas? Will my body be twenty years old or forty years old or will there be some with gray hair and wrinkles? When John says we will be like "him" I don't think he's referring to what our bodies will be like in the resurrection. John's referring more to what our life will be like. We shall be like him - perfect and holy. We shall be like Adam and Eve in the beginning, created in the image of God and made to be like God. Gone will be our sinful flesh and all those terrible temptations! Gone will be the

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guilt and the shame we feel when we've failed to do good and managed to do only evil! Imagine having only pure, peaceful and happy thoughts in your mind all the time. Imagine the joy of loving perfectly all the time. And that's not all... John says we'll see him as he is. We'll see Jesus face to face! Can you imagine what that will be like? The Apostle John did a lot of imagining at the end of his life. Imprisoned on an island. Separated from his friends. Living into his 90's under the harsh conditions on a prison island. My guess is every morning John got up and thought, "Maybe today I will get to see Jesus face to face!" I know many people who get up every day even now and say the same thing. Maybe today I'll get to see Jesus face to face... When life isn't treating you fairly, when you're struggling with your health, when you can't seem to keep a handle on your emotions, when you wonder why bad things keep happening to good people, I invite you to take a few minutes to imagine... As God's children you have that right! Because that is what you are! Believe it is so. Imagine what it will be like. And finally, the third thing I want us to consider from this scripture reading...
Work at it!

Work at it... Here's what I mean... Can people tell who your heavenly Father is by taking one look at you? Do you look much like the other children of God you see in God's family? Is your walk through life straight and true? Can people tell from the smile on your face you are glowing with the joy of God?

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When you open your mouth, is your speech characteristic of your Father's Word? Is it truthful? Honest? Pure? Kind? Loving? Are your desires for heavenly things or earthly pleasures? "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!" Remember who you are! God has purified you with the blood of his Son. He has called you to be his Child. He put his name on you in your baptism and adopted you as a member of his family. Because of this lavish love showered on me by God our Father, I want to become more like him every day. That's why John says, "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure." In this case, the English verb doesn't quite catch the flavor of what it says in the Greek. A better translation would be, "Everyone who has this hope *keeps on purifying* himself, just as he is pure." I was born with brown hair and hazel eyes, just like my dad, but I learned to work hard and to be loyal from watching him and trying to be like him. In the same way, as God's spiritual children, we become more and more like God every day we walk with him. We keep on purifying ourselves, just as he is pure. What does that mean to keep on purifying ourselves? First, we examine ourselves so we can see the impurities and the imperfections. We look at how we act and how we talk. We examine our feelings and our attitudes and our desires. We can compare ourselves to Jesus and even look to the Commandments to measure where we're at on the pureness or Holiness scale. If we're being

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honest, we'll find ourselves falling short in so many ways. When we come up against the reality of our sinful nature we can bring these impurities to the throne of our Father in confession and claim the promises of God's mercy, grace, and love. In the first chapter, John wrote, "If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." In humbleness and thanks for the love God lavishes on us, we can leave our sin at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ. It has no place in our lives any longer not because we're so good, but because God loves us. Because we are God's children! That is what we are! If... no... *when* we're unsuccessful again because we're weak, we can look to God for strength and try again tomorrow. And the next day. And the next. In this life we will never be able to become just like him in every way, yet we do not despair, because God has promised never to forsake us as his children. Here's the best news of all, we know one day, when we are with him in heaven, we will be just like him! For we shall see him as he is. (SLIDE)

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! *Believe* it to be true. *Imagine* what it will be like in heaven someday! *Work at it*, becoming more like him every day of your lives. Thank you Jesus for making us your brothers and sisters and children of our heavenly Father. Help us to be more like you for the sake of the world and to the glory of your name. Amen.