

Children of the Devi

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 30th of January 2000.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Children of the Devil and is from John chapter 8 verses 31 to 59.

You may like to keep open the passage from John chapter 8 page 871 in the Black Bibles. This is part of a sermon series through the Gospel of St. John which will take us up to Easter.

I read this week that Thomas Jefferson had had a child through his slave woman. And the reason why this is now discovered and known and so on is because of DNA testing.

The wonders of modern technology has been able to prove paternity for some particular descendant of Thomas Jefferson. That is, they have been able to say for certain that he had had a child, at least one, some say more, through his particular slave woman.

[1 : 22] In this passage in John chapter 8, the issue of paternity is before us. But this is not a thing that will be proven.

Paternity here will not be proven through science or DNA, but rather through a moral test and a test that is focused on or hinges on response to Jesus Christ.

This is a question of paternity. Indeed, this passage is quite remarkable for another reason. It's the most unsuccessful New Christians course ever.

The people who are engaging Jesus in conversation at the beginning of the passage are people who had believed in him. They're new Christians. They've responded warmly to the things in the earlier part of the chapter and decided to become Christian.

By the end of this discussion with Jesus, they're picking up stones to kill him. So this is not certainly a model for how to follow up new Christians and lead them into deeper things of Christian faith.

[2 : 36] What went wrong? And why? Jesus' opening words in verse 31 seems straightforward enough. If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth.

That seems warm and inviting enough. Jesus is saying that true faith perseveres. It doesn't just start well, but it continues well. He says, if you continue in my word, that is, you continue to follow it, to learn it, study it, understand it, and keep it and obey it, cling to it and hold fast to it, then you truly will be my disciples.

And then you'll know the truth. Not because you'll have a greater intellect or intellectual capacity, but rather knowledge has moral commitment associated with it, in this gospel especially.

That is, we'll know the truth when we keep Jesus' word, because knowledge of the truth is about obeying it and keeping God's word.

And then at the end of his little opening words here comes the thing that really causes the problem. And the truth will make you free. Now that looks warm and inviting enough.

[4 : 00] It ought not to create too many problems. But it does. What does he mean by saying, and the truth will make you free? Free from what?

Well, the Jews to whom Jesus is speaking object to this. They answered him, we are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying you will be made free?

They're not just asking for clarification here. They're actually objecting to Jesus' statement that the truth will make you free. They're saying, we don't need to be set free.

We're children of Abraham. You're insulting us by suggesting that we should be made free. It's rather an odd comment because the Jewish history was one where from time to time they were slaves to the Egyptians back in the time of Moses, to the Assyrians in about 720 BC onwards, to the Babylonians in the 6th century, certainly under the government of Persia at the end of the 6th century, under the government of Greece, and then in Jesus' day to Rome.

And in each of those times, there would have been Jewish slaves. So it is a strange comment to say we've never been slaves to anyone, where quite evidently they were.

[5 : 18] But certainly behind their comment is a proud boast. We are the children of Abraham. They are boasting about their paternity, about their heredity from Abraham 2000 BC.

So Jesus clarifies what he means. Very truly I tell you, he says. A solemn pronouncement when it's introduced in that sort of way.

That is, take note, this is important. Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. Not everybody who commits a sin, but everybody who commits sin.

That is part of the practice of their life. Now Jesus is not really saying there are two groups of people, those who don't commit sin and those who do. It's actually an all-embracing sort of statement.

Everybody commits sin. Everybody's under this category. Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. Now this is the key thing.

[6 : 19] This is the thing that provokes the hostility to Jesus in the end, this statement here. Jesus is saying that all people sin, but that sin is not just something that we might just do occasionally as a little act that somehow we are in control of.

Jesus is saying that at the heart of humanity is rebellion against God, is moral imperfection. He's not saying that everybody is evil all the time with every single thing that they do.

He acknowledges that people are a mixture of good and bad, but that there is a fundamental flaw in human nature that means that we fail God.

We fail to love him perfectly and we fail to love other people perfectly. And as a result of that, we are enslaved to sin.

That is, no matter how much effort or will we expend, we cannot get out of its grip. It's beyond us. We're slaves to it.

[7 : 26] If you were a slave in the Roman Empire, you needed somebody else to set you free. Here Jesus is saying, we are slaves to sin. No matter how much determination I have, I can't break its shackles.

Wake up in the morning and vow with the utmost sincerity and determination and effort and will and energy to say, I will not sin today, I will break its shackles. When you go to bed at night, as sure as the sun goes down at night, you will know that you have failed to break its grip somewhere.

There will be a time when you've been selfish, not selfless. There will be a time when you've ignored God when you ought not to. A time when you've lacked love for another person or for God when you ought to have, and so on.

Sin has a grip. It's taken hold. We are its slaves. That's why Jesus uses the illustration in verses 35 and 36.

The slave does not have a permanent place in the household. The son has a place there forever. So if the son makes you free, you'll be free indeed.

[8 : 36] He's saying there that you can't make yourself free from sin. Somebody else has to do it. And the person who's qualified to do it with respect to God's household is the son, Jesus himself.

Jesus is saying here that he qualifies to set the slaves free and that he is doing it or offers to do it. That's the thrust of what his word is saying here.

Jesus will do what we cannot do. That's why he's come. Now we might think that those words are a great invitation.

They are. To have faith in the son who sets us free. But in saying them, Jesus is striking at the very heart of the boastfulness of his Jewish audience.

They are saying we don't need to be set free because we're descendants from Abraham and that's what counts. And so he's coming right at the heart of their spiritual confidence or complacency and saying that it's misplaced.

[9 : 41] There's no boast for racial pedigree here. There's no place for pride in ancestry. We, probably most of us, are not descendants racially from Abraham.

We do well to heed this warning because there are plenty of us who from time to time misplace our spiritual confidence. We think that because our parents or grandparents or great-grandparents were Christians or missionaries or rather ministers or some great spiritual person, then somehow we, by their ancestry, have got our place in God's heaven.

Or maybe even our past is more limited and we think back to our own past. Well, I went to a Christian school and I was brought up in Sunday school and therefore I have spiritual confidence that I'm right with God.

But Jesus' opening words made it very clear. If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples. Not if you began at one point in your past to trust in my word.

That doesn't make you his disciples truly. But if you continue, it's a present tense. It's where you stand now with God's word, not where you or your parents or ancestors once stood with it that matters.

[10 : 57] Last month, I was in Egypt and I caught a bus down the Sinai Peninsula for about a seven-hour bus trip.

And on the way, it would stop a couple of times for toilet breaks, such as Egyptian toilets are, and ice cream breaks or drinks, which basically was water.

And at one place, there was an Australian tourist on this bus and he was buying an ice cream and I was further back in the queue to buy an ice cream. And he handed over his very dirty, as Egyptian money is, Egyptian pounds to buy an ice cream.

He had the ice cream in his hand. Handed over his money and the vendor would not take his money. He said it's illegal tender. Now, I'm not quite sure whether he was right in saying that.

It may just have been that it was too dirty, but why single that money out from every other Egyptian pound? I'm not sure. But this Australian tourist got very angry and irritated and quite incensed that this vendor would not take his money.

[12 : 03] He felt cheated somehow that he'd been given counterfeit money. Well, in the end, it wasn't much. I mean, we're only talking about a few cents. In the end, another Egyptian standing next to him in the queue paid for his ice cream for him.

And off he went and no doubt enjoyed his ice cream. The same sort of things happening here with these Jews. They think that they can do spiritual transaction with God on the basis of ancestry from Abraham.

That that is the currency they're trying to deal with God. And Jesus here is saying it is spiritually illegal tender. It is counterfeit money. It will not work or buy anything from God.

It's the wrong currency. It's the wrong notes. It doesn't hold. The correct currency and the only correct currency is if you continue in Jesus' word.

Then, and only then, will you truly be God's disciples and Jesus' disciples. You've probably heard that Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, is trying to get rid of most of the hereditary peers in the House of Lords.

[13 : 16] God's done it already because the true Lord's House has no people there by right of ancestry or heredity. That's the issue, that's the point that Jesus is making here.

Now this encounter with these Jews now becomes a little bit more sinister. In verse 37, Jesus says, I know that you are descendants of Abraham, yet you look for an opportunity to kill me because there is no place in you for my word.

It's not just that they're indifferent. They've now become hostile. so much so that people who just a few verses before were told believed in him are now beginning to plan and plot to kill him.

And that will reach its crescendo at the end of the passage when they pick up stones to actually do it. Jesus goes on then to say to them in verse 39, in response to them saying, Abraham is our father, he says to them, if you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did.

But now you're trying to kill me, a man who's told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. Jesus is saying, your descendants from Abraham doesn't actually carry water.

[14 : 41] Racially, you may be his descendants, but in character you are far from it. Abraham was a person whose faith was noted in both the Old Testament and in the first reading today from the writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament.

A person who, though not perfect, was one who trusted in God by and large and obeyed his word, did what God commanded him to out of faith. But these Jews, in response to Jesus, are showing that they don't actually belong to Abraham's family after all.

In rejecting Jesus, they're actually rejecting God. and thus they're renouncing their true descent from Abraham. That's what Jesus is pointing out to them here.

And they don't like it one bit. You see, Jesus is saying here that spiritual paternity is grounded in character and morality, not racial descent, like father, like son, or daughter, or child.

Abraham was one of obedient faith. These Jews are not, and therefore, they are not truly the descendants of Abraham. They don't belong to him. He is not really, therefore, their father.

[16 : 01] So whose are they then? Jesus says at the beginning of verse 41, you are indeed doing what your father does, but it's clear that he doesn't mean Abraham because he's just said you're not doing what Abraham did.

So to whom is he referring? Well, they reply to him probably rather rudely, we are not illegitimate children because probably it was rumoured that Jesus was illegitimate because Mary and Joseph were not married at the time of his birth.

We have one father, God himself, which raises their boast to another and higher level. Okay, well, if you're not talking about Abraham, God is our father then.

They're proudly boasting here. Jesus shows them that that claim is also spurious. He goes on to say in verse 42, if God were your father, you would love me for I came from God and now I'm here.

I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. The test of being a child of God is loving his one true son, Jesus Christ.

[17 : 21] And in refusing to acknowledge Jesus, they are showing that they're not really God's children after all. In refusing to acknowledge their own slavery to sin, they're refusing to acknowledge Jesus and hence God as well.

in fact, the end of verse 43, Jesus says, it is because you cannot accept my word. Literally, it means you can't bear it.

It's as though you're like one of those people who've got a severe allergy to sunlight. They can never be outside in even a day like today because the sunlight will trigger off allergic reactions to them.

That's the intensity of what Jesus is saying here. Because you're not God's children, you're actually highly allergic to God's word. It produces a reaction in you and we see that here because in the end they seek to kill him.

But Jesus hasn't finished with them yet. Now he explains what he meant by saying you are acting as your father does. He says in verse 44, you are from your father, the devil.

[18 : 33] Not a very polite thing to say, is it? It's hardly something we'd ever want to say to somebody in the street. Walk up to them and say, I think your father's the devil. I mean, in our day and age, even with some reluctance I suppose, we reserve that sort of statement to people like Hitler or Pol Pot.

But he's just talking to a bunch of Jews, religious people, who just a few verses ago were placing their faith in him. Can hardly imagine a greater insult. Imagine being the Jews being told that your father's the devil.

Imagine the sort of bitter taste it would leave in your mouth as though you've just swallowed a bottle of almond essence and go, oh, yuck. That would be the sort of reaction you would expect.

But the evidence is clear. Jesus says the devil is both a murderer and a liar, referring to the fact that he led Adam and Eve into sin and provoked Cain to kill Abel, and that his first words to Eve in the Garden of Eden were lies.

God had said, you'll die if you eat this fruit, and the devil said, no, you won't. And in the end they did. That characterises the devil. Murder and lies.

[19 : 51] And so too, sadly, these Jews talking to Jesus. Because they're seeking to kill Jesus, that is, they're seeking to be murderers. Verse 37, we saw that, it's repeated in verse 40, and at the end of the passage they pick up stones.

And the very fact that they refuse the truth about Jesus, shows that they embrace lies. Jesus goes on to say in verse 45, but because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.

It's not just an incidental fact that they happen not to believe this aspect of truth, but it's because Jesus tells the truth that they don't believe him. That is, if Jesus told lies, they believe him.

But because he tells the truth, they refuse him. So Jesus is saying in effect, your response to me, Jesus Christ, shows who your true father is.

The very fact that you don't believe me shows that you're a liar, and that you're seeking to kill me shows you to be a murderer in your heart. Who then can your father be?

[20 : 55] But only the devil. In contrast, the child of God embraces and welcomes and believes in Jesus. He says in verse 47, whoever is from God, hears the words of God.

The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God. Now this is a very blunt argument. It's one that maybe we think is a bit over the top.

We're a bit severe. In our day and age, nobody likes telling anybody else that they're ever wrong anymore. Because in our day and age, we're encouraged to think that there is no such thing as absolute right or wrong.

But if something's right for you, then go ahead and do it. If it's right for you to do something else, go ahead and do that. We don't like failing children at school, and when I was studying in England, one student who failed was taking the college to court because they'd failed him.

The fact that he didn't turn up for the exam was beside the point. But our day and age is encouraging us to think that any lifestyle is valid, any opinion is valid, there's no such thing as truth anymore.

[22 : 16] And in the area of religion, that is very clearly the case. We're told in our newspapers and so on that any religion is valid. It doesn't matter whether you're a Buddhist or a Christian or a Hindu, they're all paths to God, and if it gives you some sort of personal inner peace or satisfaction, then do it.

Nike is the greatest religion of all, of course. But that itself is a lie, and therefore of the devil. Jesus is the truth, the absolute truth.

He's not just truth for you if you like him or not, and somebody else can be equally true for somebody else. The only path to God is Jesus.

The only one who sets us free is Jesus. The only one who is perfectly of God is Jesus. He's the truth.

And anybody who refuses him or ignores him or does not continue to keep his word reflects the fact that they've abandoned the truth and embraced the lies, and therefore they show who their diabolical parent is.

[23 : 33] Don't be tempted by our world to downgrade Jesus as to being one amongst many. Don't be tempted by our world to think that Christianity is a man-made religion like all the others and therefore equally valid or invalid.

Don't succumb to the lie of what is relativism that says there is no such thing as truth. Have your opinions if they're true for you that's what matters. Don't succumb to the lie of pluralism, that there are many paths and they all end up with God so just walk down whichever one looks most attractive to you.

The child of God is the one who continues in Jesus' word. None other. Well all that's a bit too much for these bamboozled and rather outraged Jews.

They resort to insult saying are we not right in saying that you're a Samaritan? I mean that's even harsher than calling somebody a Tasmanian or a Queenslander. And that you have a demon? I mean the irony there is that they're saying that the one who's perfectly true is actually the opposite of that.

So who Jesus responds and says I'm not a demon and he goes on to downplay himself a little bit. He says in the next couple of verses I'm really just an obedient son doing exactly what the father tells me.

[24 : 50] Who are you claiming to be? They ask him. Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died and so did the prophets. Yet you say whoever keeps my word will never taste death.

Jesus has repeated his offer and said if you keep my word you'll never die. And they think well Abraham died and the prophets died. Well who is this guy claiming to be?

I'm just an obedient son he says. But then he says in answer to the question in verse 56. Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day.

He saw it and was glad. That's a weird sort of thing to say. Abraham had been 2000 years before. These Jews don't understand what he means.

They think well you're not 50 years old. How can you have seen Abraham or him seen you? But Jesus is referring there to a couple of things. One is he's saying that Abraham looked forward to the fulfilment of promises that God had made him.

[25 : 55] Promises of a nation that would come from him. Of land. Of blessing to the world. Lord. That's what Abraham looked forward to. But Jesus is also saying in effect that Abraham is still alive.

He died yes physically but he now rejoices to see those promises being fulfilled in Jesus because Jesus says he looked forward to my day.

Not the day of the Lord as it's described in the Old Testament but to my day. To Jesus day. Jesus is saying then that all those promises to Abraham that he looked forward to see are fulfilled in Jesus and what's more Abraham is still alive to see them and rejoices in seeing them.

Now the Jews don't understand all that. They're still outraged and confused. They think that Jesus is too young for all this to happen. Jesus' final words in this chapter are rather a resounding climax.

He says very truly I tell you that is pay attention this is important. Before Abraham was I am. Not before Abraham was I existed.

[27 : 05] Though that's true. But before Abraham was I am. And for his Jewish listeners that would have struck an incredible note.

It's already clear that Jesus is claiming something greater than Abraham about himself. And Abraham was their revered patriarch. But now Jesus becomes the most explicit perhaps he ever does when he says I am.

The name of God in the Old Testament. Jesus is claiming here with very little veil of confusion to be God himself. To be divine.

The Jews understand what he means because they pick up stones to stone him. They think he's a blasphemer by calling himself God. And blasphemy was punishable by stoning in the Old Testament.

The people who sought to believe in Jesus have picked up stones to kill him. Fickle faith indeed. What's gone wrong here for these Jews is this.

[28 : 17] Nothing offends us more than an attack on our self-sufficiency. That we can do it. That we have the resources or the capability to achieve, to win, to meet our goals.

And with God the same. There's nothing that we hold on to more firmly than the props of our own self-esteem. The things that bring us in our mind at least some worth or value.

Our abilities and achievements. And when our self-esteem is under threat, we usually respond with indignant defence.

Humanity as a whole has a very positive view of itself. It thinks it's capable of everything. You see it week after week in the papers about scientific progress.

And you see it rather oddly at the end of the millennium. With the boastfulness about the greatest people who've done this, that and the other and everything else and what wonderful progress we've made in this century.

[29 : 23] Turning a blind eye to the continued problems of sin and evil and strife and poverty and war and the list could go on and on. Nobody likes being told that they're slaves to sin.

Nobody likes being told that they're in a predicament from which they themselves cannot extricate themselves. We prefer to think that we're basically good and basically okay.

The truth is other than that. That's what's brought up the shackles on the back of the shackles on the back of these Jews.

You are slaves to sin. But the good news is that the sun sets free. And that's what the gospel is about. And the true child of God is one who continues in the word of Jesus.

Morally, as a disciple, trusting what he says, acknowledging its truth, and serving him through thick and thin. The true disciple is not one who's been brought up as a Christian necessarily.

[30 : 34] It's not one whose parents or grandparents were Christian. It's present attitude that matters. Whether or not now, today, we are keeping in God's word, in Jesus' word, real faith perseveres.

Real faith is faith today and tomorrow and the next day and next week and the week after, regardless of what happens, regardless of circumstance. Real faith perseveres through thick and thin.

The debate has been a debate about paternity, like father, like child. And Jesus has made it clear that spiritual paternity is evident in our response to Jesus Christ.

If we love him and obey him and continue in keeping his word, accepting him and believing in him, then we produce the evidence that our father is God in heaven.

But if we refuse him or ignore him, if we fail to continue to keep in his word, regardless of the superficials or the exteriors of our life, then we've actually produced evidence that our father is not God, nor Abraham, but indeed, sadly, the devil.

[32 : 06] And Jesus leaves us no other option. We belong to one or the other. God damn it. Amen. Amen. Now... Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen., amen.