

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 13, 2020**

**RECEIVING THE WORD
John 1:10-13**

PREVIOUSLY

People who know me well know that my favorite TV show is NCIS. It's okay if you disagree – it is not one of the essentials of the faith (!) – and the show may not be a realistic portrayal of how the NCIS really operates, but I have enjoyed the exploits of Gibbs, DiNozzo, McGee, Ziva, Torres, Bishop, Ducky, Palmer, Abby, Directors Shepard and Vance, along with FBI agent Fornell and others for many years. Often, when the show builds on unresolved matters from an earlier episode, the current episode will begin with: “Previously, on NCIS ...”

So, too, with our exploration of the opening verses of the Gospel of John. Previously, two weeks ago, we saw in verses 1-5 that there was never a time when Jesus was not. From eternity past, from before the creation of the world, from before the beginning of time, He always was. He – the Word, the *Logos*, the full expression of God's personality – was there in the beginning.

Just as there was never a time when He was not, there was never a time when He was not *God*. It is not just that He was, but that Jesus was and is God. Always was. Is now. Always will be. He who was fully God became, in the incarnation, fully man. Not either-or, but both-and. Fully God and fully man, united in one person forever.

We also saw that Jesus is the Source and Giver of life and light, without whom we are never more than an inch from disaster, but with whom our hearts are secure forever.

Last week we looked at verses 6-9, where John the apostle introduced us to John the Baptist, a man sent from God to be a witness to the Word. John came not to point to himself but to point people to Jesus, the true light that gives light to everyone who turns to Him.

In examining the life and witness of John, we emphasized three lessons we can learn from his life:

- The importance of knowing who you are and who you are not.
- The importance of knowing your God-given purpose.
- The grace of humility – because, as John understood, it's not about you or me; it's not about us, it's all about Jesus.

Today, we continue with verses 10-13. So, let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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The late James Montgomery Boice – pastor, author, theologian, radio Bible teacher – preached four sermons on this passage, one sermon for each verse (!). I’m not going to do that. I’m going to try to condense the message of these verses into one sermon.

NOT THE WAY IT SHOULD BE

You may have heard that, less than two weeks ago, a 15-month-old boy named Carmelo Duncan was shot and killed in Washington, DC, while in a car with his father and his 8-year-old brother. It is a horrible tragedy whenever the life of an innocent person is snuffed out. Even more so when the victim is just a baby.

It is not the way it should be. Things like this should never happen. But they do. The shooting death of Carmelo is just a single instance among thousands (or more) in a world where so many things are not the way they should be.

Think about this: It was not the way it should have been when Jesus – the eternal Son of God, the incarnate, living Word – came to earth. They shouldn’t have treated Him the way they did. He should have been welcomed with open arms. He should have been greeted with great rejoicing (as the angels and the shepherds did). He should have been received with adoration and praise. He should have been honored and hailed in a manner befitting the King He was and is.

But that is not the way it was when He came into the world. As the prophet Isaiah forecast, “He was despised and rejected by men” (Isaiah 53:3). Rejected by those He came to save. Rejected by His own people. They failed to recognize Him. They refused to honor Him. They refused to receive Him when He came. It is not the way it should have been. But it is the way it was. Here is how *The Message* expresses it in verses 10 and 11: “He (Jesus – the Word) was in the world, the world was there through Him” – in other words, He made it all – “and yet the world didn’t even notice. He came to His own people, but they didn’t want Him.”

They didn’t want Him. And still today, sad to say, there are many – millions and millions of people – who don’t want Jesus. They want nothing to do with Him. Some people even think the biggest problem with the world is Jesus and people like you and me who believe in Him and want to live under His loving Lordship. It’s a fact of life in the world of the 21st century.

CHILDREN OF GOD

But, says John, not everybody rejected Him when He came. The Gospels bear witness that there were some who did welcome Him with open arms and open hearts. There were some who received Him gladly. To them, the Bible says, Jesus gave the right – the incomparable, incredible privilege – of becoming children of God (1:12).

Contrary to what many people believe (or want to believe), not everyone is a child of God. Do you see that? God is the Creator of every person and everything. But He is not everyone’s Father. Not everyone can legitimately claim God as their Father. You are not a member of *God’s family* by birth. You are a member of the *human family* by birth. By birth you are a

member of a *particular family*. I was born into the family of Roger and Arlene Smith and all their ancestors. I am a member of the *Smith family* by birth. But I am not – and you are not – a member of *God's family* by birth. None of us has been born – physically – into the family of God.

How does one become a child of God and a member of God's family? As John says in verse 13, it is not by human descent or blood relationships. Having an elder or pastor or missionary in your family doesn't qualify you for membership in God's family. Whatever the circumstances of your conception or birth, it does not, cannot, and will not make you a child of God.

You become a child of God and a member of His family only by adoption. Spiritual adoption. Adoption into God's family is not something you can earn. It is not a right you can claim. No one has a right to be adopted into God's family. Adoption into God's family is a gift of God's free, sovereign, gracious choice. It is a gift of grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will, a gift to be received by faith alone – by believing in the name of Jesus.

Throughout history, many have rejected this gift. Many reject it today. Many reject the Word who became flesh. Many turn their backs on Jesus. Many refuse to receive Him.

John speaks of the saving love of Jesus and the unwillingness of so many to accept it (and Him) in John 3, starting in verse 16: "For God so loved the world" – and you and me – "that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world" – in and through the person of Jesus, the true light that gives light to everyone (1:9) – "but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed" (3:16-20).

This, sadly, is the way it is and has been since the first sin of Adam and Eve in the garden (Genesis 3).

But, as I said a few moments ago, not everyone rejected Jesus. Not everyone rejects Him today. Some do receive Him with open arms and grateful, trusting hearts. Some do take hold of Him and the salvation He graciously offers. And to all who do, to all who receive Him by faith, even today – right now! – He gives the amazing gift of a new status and a new relationship with God. The wonder of it all continued to amaze John as long as he lived. In 1 John 3:1, he declared: "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!"

Children of God. Not by our human ancestry. Not by our ethnic background. Not by virtue of the family you were born into. Not as a result of the circumstances of your birth. But by

adoption. Spiritual adoption. By the new birth. By spiritual rebirth through faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

John suggests that there are really only two kinds of people in the world: Those who receive the Lord Jesus and His claims through faith in Him, and those who don't. Or won't. Only two groups. In which group are you?

BELIEVING AND RECEIVING

It is crucial to understand that it is not enough to simply believe certain truths about Jesus in your head. Knowing the right answers and believing the right doctrines in your head are not enough. As James point out, even the demons believe in God intellectually (James 2:19). Even the devil's legions know the truth. But what good does it do them?

18 Inches

Did you know that some people miss heaven by about 18 inches? Just 18 inches! (Which, by the way, is what is called a cubit in the Bible – the distance from a person's elbow to the tip of the middle finger.) 18 inches is roughly the distance between your head and your heart. Knowing the truth about Jesus intellectually and believing it in your head will never make you a child of God if you never actually receive the Word – Jesus – by faith and embrace His as Savior in your heart.

To be adopted into God's family – to belong to Jesus – involves both believing in Him and receiving Him as Savior and Lord.

Under the Tree

Think of it this way: Suppose there is an expensive gift under your Christmas tree. The tag says it's for you. You know what is in the box. You know it is really expensive. You know it represents the extravagant love of the gift-giver. And it is for you. You know all of that. But until you open it, until you "receive" it and unwrap it, of what use is it to you? It's not really yours in the fullest sense. It is of no benefit to you.

For many people, and perhaps for some of you listening to this message, the gift of salvation in Christ is like an unopened gift. It is for everyone who will receive it, accept it, and open it by faith. But if you refuse to receive it, it will never be yours. If you refuse to receive Him, you will never be His. And that would be a tragedy.

Evgeni Onegin

Evgeni Onegin is the title character in a novel by a 19th-century Russian writer named Alexander Pushkin. In the novel, Onegin, a jaded aristocrat, meets an innocent young girl named Tatyana. After their meeting, Tatyana writes him a letter, offering him her love, but he does not reply. When they meet again, he turns her down. Her letter was touching, he says, but he would soon grow bored of marriage to her. Years later, Onegin attends a party in St.

Petersburg where he sees a stunningly beautiful woman. It is Tatyana. But she is now married. Onegin falls in love with her and tries desperately to win her back. But she refuses him. Once, the door was open; she had offered him her love. But now the door is shut.

The world is full of people like Onegin. Instead of Tatyana, it is the love of Jesus that so many reject. Like Tatyana's letter to Onegin, Jesus' offer is touching. But we believe we will be happier without a commitment to Him. We may worry that He will cramp our style, that He will take away our freedom. So we leave Him behind and move on with life. One day, the Bible says, we will see Jesus in all His glory. His majesty will be plainly and painfully visible to our eyes. We will know in that moment, as Rebecca McLaughlin says, that all our greatest treasures in life are nothing compared with Him. And we will bitterly regret our decision to go our own way. But Jesus' rejection of us will be no more unfair than Tatyana's rejection of Onegin. If we receive Jesus now, we will live with Him forever in a fullness of life we cannot begin to imagine. But if we reject Him, He will one day reject us, and we will be cut off from Him forever. (Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion*, 219.)

Yes

Here is another story. Ted and Janet had been dating for seven years (!). But they always seemed to be at different places in their lives. Every Valentine's Day, Ted would propose to Janet. And every Valentine's Day, Janet would say: "No, not yet."

Finally, Ted ran out of patience. (Imagine that!) He bought a ring and took Janet to a romantic restaurant, determined to propose one last time. Another "No" would mean he had to get on with his life without her.

After dinner, he knew the time had come. But Janet had brought a gift for him. So he held back. He said: "What did you bring?" She handed him a box the size of a book. He opened it and slowly peeled away the tissue paper. Then he saw it. It was a cross-stitch Janet had made that simply said: "Yes."

Yes. What a beautiful word! Have you said "Yes" to the Lord Jesus? Have you been adopted into God's family through faith in Jesus? I'm not just asking if you believe that He is who He says He is and that He did what the Bible says He did. I'm asking if you have opened your heart to *receive* Him and the gift of salvation He offers. If your answer is "Yes," you have been born of God – "born again," spiritually reborn, as Jesus would say to Nicodemus in John 3.

"To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

May it be so in each and every one of us.

As Corrie ten Boom once said: "If Jesus were born a thousand times in Bethlehem but not in me, then I would still be lost."

Dear friends, *believe* in Jesus, the Word of God who came to us. *Receive* Jesus the Word, apart from whom you are destined for darkness and separation from God.

If you have never done it, or are not sure if you have ever taken the step to receive Jesus by faith, I invite you to do so today.

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