

## Who's Your Daddy?

John 8:39-47

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

<sup>39</sup> They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, <sup>40</sup> but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. <sup>41</sup> You are doing the works your father did." They said to him, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God." <sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. <sup>43</sup> Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. <sup>44</sup> You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. <sup>45</sup> But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. <sup>46</sup> Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? <sup>47</sup> Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

– John 8:39-47, ESV

### What is Fatherhood?

One of the most compelling aspects of the Star Wars movies is the exploration of fatherhood. What does it mean to be a father or to have a father? Anakin Skywalker had no father, but some rumors are that a Sith Lord named Darth Pelagius manipulated the Force into creating him. Anakin is Luke Skywalker's father, something which drives Luke to seek to redeem him. Although Anakin is Luke's father, Obi-Wan Kenobi is more of a father figure to Luke, guiding him as a father should. The new series of Star Wars movies features Kylo Ren, the new bad guy, who was born Ben Solo, so his father is Han Solo. Han tries to rescue his son, and ends up being killed for his efforts.

The Star Wars movies have resonated so deeply with people because they explore such deep and foundational life questions. What does it mean to be a father? How much are we influenced by our fathers? Should we accept the influence of our fathers or seek to resist it? Can a son influence his father as much as a father can influence his son?

Since I became a father over 13 years ago, these questions about fatherhood have often occupied my thoughts and prayers. How much of an influence do I have on my children? Can I shape the way they think and what they value, so they will follow the Lord? Why does my sin hurt them so much? Can God's grace cover over and heal the hurt I've caused? As fathers, most of us would love to pass on the good in us to our children and shield them from the bad. Sadly, that's not how fatherhood works. Thankfully, salvation is not dependent on biological fatherhood.

We all know that children imitate what they see in their fathers, but that's not the same thing as saying that all children will end up just like their fathers, although all children are deeply influenced and profoundly shaped by their fathers. In today's passage, Jesus is challenging deep cultural assumptions about earthly fatherhood and pointing us to consider some deep and powerful truths about spiritual fatherhood.

#### A. Father Abraham? (vv. 39-41)

At the end of last week's passage, Jesus was insinuating something sinister about the real father of His Jewish opponents. He said, "I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father." He acknowledges their biological descent from Abraham, but then He hints that their real influence comes from a very different father.

They reject Jesus' insinuation by boldly asserting, "Abraham is our father."

Jesus then says to them, *“If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.”*

Then, He repeats the insinuation of a different father again: *“You are doing the works your father did.”*

What is happening below the surface of this exchange? The Jewish people had come to believe that they were blessed by God because of Abraham, the man of God and the father of the faith. Through Abraham’s faith and faithfulness, all his rightful descendants were blessed by God and given salvation and protection. The only way to lose this was to reject Abraham’s fatherhood by apostasy and abandonment of the Jewish people. Many Jewish people still believe this today. Most Jewish people in Israel are not religious and do not keep kosher or worship in synagogue, yet many of them still believe they are God’s chosen people and are special because of Abraham.

But it’s not just Jewish people, of course. We can all be tempted to claim some credential or qualification for blessing of some sort based on our earthly parentage and heritage. It can be a fine line separating a deep appreciation for our heritage and a sense of entitlement based on that heritage.

### **B. Father God? (vv. 41-43)**

But these people who are speaking with Jesus are religious Jews. They are not content to rest on their ethnic heritage, so they get spiritual, saying, *“We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.”* Here we see one of the favorite tactics of religious people: Establishing their self-righteousness by slinging mud at others. Religious people can be so quick to deal in dirt – accusation, innuendo, rumor, gossip – without any real basis in fact. They do so to make themselves feel better about themselves and to look better in the eyes of others.

The innuendo here – *“We were not born of sexual immorality”* – throws shade on Jesus’ parentage. They will intensify this line of attack in next week’s passage, but the innuendo is already thick. Jesus is the one with the shady fatherhood, not them. To lay it on thick, as religious people love to do, they follow up their innuendo with the pompous self-righteous declaration: *“We have one Father – even God.”*

Being a religious person doesn’t make you a child of God. In the context of John’s Gospel, John has already told us how we can become children of God, and what matters and what doesn’t matter in becoming a child of God, in John 1:12-13: *“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”*

Whenever we begin to think that we are children of God because of who we are in and of ourselves or because of something we ourselves have done, we are dangerously far from the truth of the Gospel and standing on very shaky ground. It is by faith alone in Christ alone, a faith which is worked in us by the Holy Spirit alone according to the will of God alone, that we are children of God.

Our heritage, our parentage, our efforts, our religious duties, our knowledge, our morality – none of this qualifies us to call God our Father. Some of this may be the fruit of being a child of God, but none of it can belong to the root cause. To the extent that we may be good or have anything good, it is because God has loved us and made us His own. God has not made us His own because of anything He saw in us.

And yet, if God is truly our father, it will show itself in our lives. This is how fatherhood works, isn’t it? We can’t make our fathers be our fathers by our own efforts. They become our fathers before we do anything or can say anything about it. Yet once our fathers have become our fathers, the mark they leave on us is deep and indelible. So it is spiritually, too.

Notice how Jesus challenges their fatherhood claims:

*“If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.”*

*“If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.”*

The root shows itself in the fruit. If they want to claim the fatherhood of Abraham, they should demonstrate the faith of Abraham. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. These offspring of Abraham are not placing their faith in the word of God but attacking Him. If they want to claim God as their Father, they cannot reject the one who came from God and is standing before them because of the will of God.

If they reject the One who speaks the truth from God, then they are no true children of Abraham. If they reject the One who was sent from God Himself, then they are no true children of God.

### **C. Your Father, the Devil (v. 44)**

Instead, Jesus insists that their fruit shows a very different parentage:

*Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. <sup>44</sup> You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.<sup>45</sup> But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.*

They cannot bear to hear Jesus' words. They dispute, argue, resist, conspire, plot and accuse, but they will not hear and they will not understand. Why not? Jesus says it is because they cannot bear to hear His word because their origin and their fatherhood is very different from what they have been claiming.

In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul says, *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”* And then in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, he says, *“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”*

Why do some people just not get it? Why don't they see the truth so clearly revealed in Jesus? Why do they not hear and understand His words? Why are their hearts so hard and their ears so closed to Him? Paul says it is because they are merely natural people who cannot accept the things of the Spirit of God. He says it is because their minds have been blinded by Satan, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. Jesus puts it in even stronger terms. He says it is because their true father is the devil, and so they do as their father does. Jesus isn't the first one to call them the devil's children. John the Baptist called the Pharisees and the religious leaders, *“a brood of vipers,”* meaning the offspring of snakes, or the children of the devil.

The evidence that the devil is their true father is seen in two key areas: murder and lying. Jesus says the devil *“was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him.”* Both truth and life belong to God and come from God and God alone. The devil hates God and opposes God, and so he opposes and hates the truth, for God is truth, and he hates and opposes life, especially human life, because people are made in God's image. And since Jesus was and is the perfect image of God, unfallen and untarnished humanity, brilliantly reflecting the glory of God, the devil hates Jesus most of all.

Think about how these Jewish leaders have been showing themselves to be the children of the devil:

1. They have twisted the words of Jesus and sought to distort the truth of what he has taught. This is just like the serpent in the Garden, *“Has God really said . . .?”*
2. They have sought to trap Jesus and ensnare Him, just like Satan did in the Garden.

3. They have plotted to destroy Jesus, to remove Him from being an obstacle to their desires and aspirations to dominate God's people. This, too, is what Satan did in the Garden. He removed Adam from his place of authority over the creation, including over Satan himself, so Adam could not stop Satan from carrying out his desires and aspirations to dominate the world.

How do people do the same kinds of things today? They cast doubt on the Word of God, questioning and challenging what God has said. They look for loopholes and seek to escape from the clear truth God has revealed. They want to overthrow God from His position of authority, so they can carry out their desires and aspirations to live their own lives and be their own gods. Distorting and denying the truth embracing self-serving lies and seeking to overthrow God's rule are all sure fruit of the devil's fatherhood in someone's life.

Have we been guilty of this? Have we minimized, obscured, denied, glossed over or sought to overturn parts of the Bible we don't like, aspects of God's rule we don't welcome, revealed truth we'd rather suppress? Consider whether any of this sounds familiar . . .

- Are we really as sinful as the Bible says we are? Surely we're not that bad, right?
- Is God really as sovereign and supreme as the Bible says He is, or is He subject to our wills, our whims, our desires, our plans?
- Is Jesus really the only way of salvation? Doesn't that seem a bit narrow?
- Do we have to obey Jesus if we say we love Him? Can't we just say we love Him, worship Him in church on Sundays and then live as we please?
- Do I really have to love my wife? Are wives really called to respect their husbands?

Not all truth-suppression looks the same. If you're a good, religious, church-going professing Christian, you probably wouldn't openly deny the truth of God's word. So sometimes we can engage in speculation – "What if . . .?" Or "Suppose someone . . .?" Or we can engage in over-qualification or can explain away the plain meaning of God's word – "Well, what that really means is . . ." or "Well, the circumstances are so different and . . ."

All of us were, at one time, under the devil's fatherly influence. Ephesians 2:2 says we all "*once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience,*" and so we can all remember and too easily fall back into the influence, language and actions of our former way of life, of our former father. We need to beware of these tendencies and we need to strive by God's grace to be better imitators of our Heavenly Father. Our old nature may have been de-throned by the grace of God, but it still likes to rear its ugly head and whisper its lies to us.

#### **D. Father of Faith in the Word (vv. 45-47)**

Jesus' final condemnation of His opponents in today's passage is cutting and convicting, but it also holds a gem of encouragement for us –

*"But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. <sup>46</sup> Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?<sup>47</sup> Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."*

Much of the dialogue in this section of John's Gospel turns on the rules for testimony in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day. The testimony of women, children, shepherds and Samaritans was not considered worth much of anything in a legal proceeding. But Jesus was an adult Jewish male, and yet they were still not receiving His testimony. In order for them to be able to reject the testimony of an adult Jewish male, they would need to be able to convict him of some grievous sin, some horrible wrong-doing. So He issues that challenge: "*Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?*"

Then he says, “Whoever is of God hears the words of God.” This is the encouragement to us:

Are you not sure whether you are a child of God? Well, do you hear the words of God? If you hear the words of God – that is, if you believe and receive the truth of Gospel proclaimed by Jesus and recorded in Scripture, if you believe the word of God, hearing and receiving it as God’s own revelation, then you are a child of God. You don’t have to understand it all. You’re not required to be a Bible scholar or a sophisticated theologian. Do you hear the words of God? That’s not a mystical question about hearing voices; it’s tied to the plain and open testimony Jesus gives about Himself here in the Gospel of John:

- Do you believe that Jesus is the Bread of Life, the true nourishment and sustenance for your soul?
- Do you believe that Jesus is the Light of the World, the one true source of truth and goodness and joy, and that if you follow Him (and only if you follow Him), you will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life?
- Do you believe that if you come to Jesus in faith, receiving and believing in Him, then you will have the right to be called a child of God?
- Do you believe that Jesus will give you the Holy Spirit, who will be for you like many rivers of living water, bringing refreshment to your soul and flowing from you to those around you?

Can you agree, deep in your core, with these statements? -

- I am a sinner, but Jesus is the Savior.
- I was born in darkness and born into a world of darkness, but Jesus is the Light of the World and had brought light to my soul.
- I am needy and hungry and empty in and of myself, but Jesus is the One who fills me, feeds me and satisfies me.

If you can say yes, then you are born of God and you hear the words of God, and here’s what you need to do: Keep hearing the word of God. Because “Whoever is of God hears the words of God” is not just a kind of test to see whether you are a child of God, but it is an invitation to a new way of life. If you are of God, then hear the words of God.

### **What Happens When God Adopts Us?**

When God adopts us, He brings us into His family. When He brings us into His family, we come under His headship in the household of God. Imagine how silly and pointless it would be if Daddy Warbucks adopted Little Orphan Annie and then never spoke to her, or worse yet, if she never listened to him, never spent time with him, never learned from him.

If we have been adopted by God, and we want to be faithful children who imitate our Father, then we need to spend time with Him. We need to hear His words, abide in His presence, learn from Him. This doesn’t just happen in an hour or an hour and a half on Sunday morning. It’s a life-long calling. It’s our new identity. We also need to see how much we need the other members of the family of God, our brothers and sisters. We need to learn from those more mature than we are and we need to invest in those who are younger in the Lord than we are.

Whoever is of God hears the words of God. Whoever is born of God is a child of God. If we’ve been given a new life, a new identity, new eyes to see and new ears to hear, then let’s live the new life we have – listening to God, imitating Him, helping each other to listen and imitate. As we do so, we’ll grow in confidence and faith, in assurance and trust, in security and Christ-likeness, together.