[Isaiah 6:1-8](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=202" \l "hebrew_reading)

[Psalm 29](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=202#psalm_reading)

[Romans 8:12-17](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=202#epistle_reading)

[John 3:1-17](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=202#gospel_reading)

God On Our Shoulder Sermon for May 27, 2018

What does it mean to be born of God, or in the image Jesus uses in our Gospel reading this morning, to be 'born from above.'

Well the passage itself tells us, someone might reply. We become children of God, born from above, by believing in Jesus and receiving the gift of the holy Spirit.

And that is certainly what the passage does tell us, and it is therefore certainly true: that's how it happens.

But what the passage doesn't tell us is what it **means** to be born from above, to be a child of God.

Let me give an example to explain what's missing. Suppose you were to ask a crowd of people what it means to be an American.

One answer you might get would be that it means you had at least one American parent, one parent who at the time was a US citizen. Or another answer might be that you were born on American soil.

Now both those answers are true, but they wouldn't satisfy anybody outside of a civics class, would they? They simply tell you how someone becomes an American citizen. When you sincerely ask what it means to be an American, you're looking for a different sort of answer altogether, even though the answer might be a much more difficult thing to provide.

What it means to be an American is something much deeper and more spiritual than simply how to become an American citizen, with certain specified and legally guaranteed rights, along with certain specified responsibilities. To be an American refers instead to having a certain type of character, one molded by those uniquely American rights and responsibilities, a character that faithfully and willingly and proudly builds its existence on them. There’s certainly room for a constructive discussion on this question, but I would open the discussion by saying that qualities like entrepreneurship, a willingness to take chances, an ability to improvise, an openness to change, an innocent friendliness, are a few of the qualities that define what it means to be an American. And the discussion might go on from there. But the point is, it would be an interesting and meaningful discussion of something real.

I'm a Pittsburgh Steelers fan, and so I often read articles that make mention of 'the Steeler way.' That doesn't refer to how the player got drafted. It refers to a certain mindset of responsibility to the team and the ownership, a certain attitude towards hard work and toughing it out, a certain way of conduct towards the Pittsburgh community, and so on. Players who don't over time come to conform to those standards, even if they might be great players, are never quite regarded with the same affection and regard as those who do.

What it **means** to be a Steeler is to be conformed to the Steeler way. What it**means** to be an**American** is to be someone who conforms to the **American** way of doing things and looking at things and valuing things.

(As an aside, this is why I'm a strong proponent of reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in American schools, whether or not you include 'under God' in it. From the youngest age, children who are going to be productive American citizens should be ingrained with what that means: it is pledging allegiance to an indivisible nation, with liberty and justice for all. I don't know of any other brief statement that says so clearly and simply what it **means**to be an American)

But now returning to our Gospel passage, I hope we see why we said earlier that although it is an absolutely true description by our Lord of how to **become** a child of God, it was not His concern here to describe what it means to be a child of God.

Almost everything else Jesus said was about **that** question.

The early Christian teachers were very aware of the centrality of this question to the issue of how to provide instruction and guidance to the church, to the body of Christ. AS John himself wrote in one of his letters:

*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!(1 John 3:1)*

Paul wrote to the Romans: [**Romans 8:14**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Romans/8/14)

*For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are [children] of God.*

And to the Galatians: [**3:26**](https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/Galatians/3/26)

*For you are all [children] of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*

Children of God. What an extraordinary thought. Once we accept Jesus Christ as the source of our salvation, we become children of God.

But still, what does it mean, to be children of God.

Let me quote a great Christian writer named Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

*Let us never again think of the Christian as just someone who is trying to lead a good life, trying to be a little bit better than somebody else, a person with a belief in doing certain things, going through certain forms and ceremonials and keeping certain regulations dictated by the church. Christians do all that, but before all that is this vital fact that they are children of God. They have been born again, born from above, born of the Spirit; they have received something of the nature nature and life of God Himself.*

Not everyone is blessed to have been born into a strong, stable household with parents who provided an atmosphere of reliability and discipline and strength of character and concern for others. In fact, those kinds of family seem to be harder and harder to find.

But one of the great pleasures of living in a small rural community where you can see multiple generations of the same family is that you once in a while get the opportunity of seeing a mother's moral character emerging in her children as they mature, or a father's strength being reborn in his offspring. It doesn't happen all the time, but when you see it and reflect on it, the wonder of is truly moving.

And here's what's important. In everything those children do in life, from the biggest things to the smallest, in every relationship they have, in every decision and choice, with every breath they take and every word they say, those children are bearing witness that they are the children of their parents.

The passage from Romans we read this morning speaks to this very issue, what it means to be children of God. Let's read it again:

***12****Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.****13****For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.****14****For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.****15****For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+8%3A12-17&version=NKJV" \l "fen-NKJV-28132a" \t "_blank)] Father.”****16****The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,****17****and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.*

I mentioned above that not everyone is fortunate enough to be born into a stable, supportive, and responsible family setting. That is a painful truth about human reality. But if you look at the lives of those who turn into adults who do have those qualities even without the advantage of such a family, you will almost invariably find that someone else has stepped into that person's live who was willing to fulfill the role the biological parents could not or did not, and that the person in question made the conscious and deliberate and sincere decision to model her life after this new role model. Thanks to our human freedom, we are not completely constrained to be what our genetic background and early environment would require us to be.

That same human freedom is God's first gift to us. That's what Lloyd-Jones is talking about when he says: “[we] *have received something of the nature and life of God Himself.”*

And it is that same freedom that enables us, whatever our original or current circumstances might be or have been, that enables us to consciously and deliberately and sincerely make the decision to model our lives to reflect the character of our creator, our Father which art in heaven.

What it *means* to be a child of Godis to have consciously accepted the responsibility of representing God in this world, to have deliberately made the choices necessary to conform one's life to that position, and to sincerely and with determination set out along that special path.

Christ died on the cross for our salvation. That is accomplished. In my own faith, I believe that is accomplished for every single human being everywhere, now and forever.

But among those who are saved, Christians have been blessed with a special responsibility, and that is to represent God to the world, in the thousands of different ways that can be done, to act, not just as creations of God, but as God's very own children.

I follow a journalist on Twitter named Salena Zito, and she's sort of famous in the Twitterverse for how polite and courteous her tweets are. When she was asked about that one time, she said it's because every time she tweets, she has her parents on one shoulder and her children and her grandchildren the other. She tries never to write anything that might bring embarrassment to any of them.

I think that's a good rule of thumb for a Christian to live by, and one which no matter what the other consequences of our behavior might be, will at least make our Father proud.

And so, gracious and heavenly father, we pray this morning for a special sensitivity for what it means to be your children. We pray for the patience and trust to listen for your Spirit speaking through our conscience. We pray for the steadfastness of character to remain true to You, even if the going gets rough and the world starts thinking we're a little bit odd. We pray for the courage to accept self-sacrifice, since we desire to reflect you, and you yourself made the greatest self-sacrifice. We pray for daily opportunities to make You proud of us, as Jesus never failed to do, and we ask for these things in His name.