

An Expository Study of 1 John  
Part 5 (of 10 parts):

**An Exposition of 1 John 2:29—3:12**

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If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.

See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; not as Cain who was of the evil one, and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous (1 John 2:29-3:12).

The conflict between the proponents of anti-Christian falsehood and the adherents to God's revelation in His Son (2:18-28) is now shown

to be a conflict between the children of God and the children of the devil. The two classes are rigidly distinct in origin and practice. John presented true believers as children of God, characterized by the practice of righteousness and by love as the bond that holds the members of the family together. He set forth the marks of the children of God (2:29-3:3), depicted the revelation from the practice of sin (3:4-8a), held up the provision for deliverance from the practice of sin (3:8b-9), and declared the distinctness of the two classes (3:10-12).

### **The Marks of the Children of God**

John pointed to the practice of righteousness as the mark of the new birth (2:29), asserted the reality and dynamic nature of this new life (3:1-2), and noted the purifying impact of Christian hope on present conduct (3:3).

#### **THE PRACTICE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS AS THE MARK OF THE NEW BIRTH (2:29)**

The practice of righteousness reveals membership in God's family. The conditional clause, "If you know that He is righteous" (ἐὰν εἰδῆτε ὅτι δίκαιός ἐστιν), as a third-class condition leaves open the readers' answer on the matter, but does not imply that John had personal doubts as to whether they were aware of this fact. The condition is an appeal to them to confirm openly their personal perception of this reality. The adjective "righteous" denotes one who is in full accord with what is right and just in character and conduct. "He is righteous" expresses a well-known truth about the nature of God. God "is righteous in all his ways: in his laws, his promises, his verdicts, or a single act of his."<sup>1</sup> Used without an expressed subject, John's reference may be to God the Father, as in 1:9, or to Jesus Christ, as in 2:1. Westcott holds that since Christ is the subject of verse 28, "it is therefore most natural to suppose that He is the subject in this verse also."<sup>2</sup>

This identification is less certain if verse 29 is accepted as beginning a new division. An obvious difficulty with this identification is that the New Testament nowhere explicitly speaks of believers as "born of Christ." In this letter they are referred to as "born of God" (3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4), and in John 3:8 as "born of the Spirit," but nowhere as "born of Christ." In 1 John 3:1-2 believers are expressly called "children of God." Bultmann suggested that there is a

<sup>1</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (1945; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), p. 446.

<sup>2</sup> Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St John* (1892; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 83.

sudden change in the meaning of the pronoun in this verse, from Jesus to God.<sup>3</sup> Marshall holds that the statement "He is righteous" refers to Christ but that the words "born of Him" refer to God the Father. "It was probably so self-evident to him and his readers that spiritual birth was from the Father that he was not conscious of gliding from one antecedent for αὐτοῦ (Christ, 2:28-29a) to another (God, 2:29b)."<sup>4</sup> But such a shift of meaning in the pronominal designation within one sentence is not obvious. More probable is the view that both pronouns refer to God the Father. But this uncertainty as to the intended identity of his pronouns is characteristic of John. As Westcott remarks, "The true solution of the difficulty seems to be that when St John thinks of God in relation to men he never thinks of Him apart from Christ (comp. c. v. 20). And again he never thinks of Christ in His human nature without adding the thought of His divine nature."<sup>5</sup>

The conclusion, "you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him," underlines that all members of God's family display the moral nature of their Father. "You know" (γινώσκετε) may be taken as an imperative, "you must recognize,"<sup>6</sup> but the indicative is more probable as stating their acquaintance with the further fact that God's children are identified by their righteous conduct. The presence of "also" (καὶ)<sup>7</sup> indicates that the two aspects belong together. This understanding helps a believer determine if another is a true Christian.

The sure sign of the new birth is the practice of righteousness: "everyone who practices righteousness" (πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην). "Everyone" (πᾶς ὁ) asserts that this sign is true of all without exception, while "who practices righteousness" (ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην), literally, "the one doing the righteousness") declares

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, ed. Robert W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. 45. In this supposed sudden shift Bultmann found support for his view that the phrase, "clumsily appended," demonstrated the composite authorship of the epistle.

<sup>4</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 168, n. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, p. 83.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Jones, ed., *The New Testament of the Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1969). It was taken as imperative in the Vulgate, by Wycliffe, Tyndale, Cranmer, and the Rhemish version. *The New Testament in Today's English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1966) renders, "you should know, then, that every one who does what is right is God's child."

<sup>7</sup> It does not occur in the Textus Receptus, although modern textual editors generally accept it as original. For the textual evidence see Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979).

the visible sign. The present participle "denotes a habit of life, the prevailing principle of one's life, not a single act, but a succession of acts which make up the life."<sup>8</sup> The article with "righteousness" ("the righteousness") may have a possessive force, "His righteousness" as revealing God's character, or it may denote the righteousness which is truly such.

Such a lifestyle does not produce the new birth but is the visible evidence of being "born of Him" (ἐξ αὐτοῦ γεγέννηται). The perfect tense marks the past fact of the new birth and stresses the continuing reality of the new life. The expression "of Him" (ἐξ αὐτοῦ) marks the source of this new life; it is derived from God. This concept of the "new birth," first introduced here in 1 John, is prominent in the rest of the epistle (3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18); it is a familiar New Testament truth. Through this divinely imparted spiritual rebirth believers enter into the family of God, so that they truly are "children of God." It portrays a spiritual-life relationship with God and carries ethical consequences. The reality of one's membership in the family of God is revealed to others through the practice of righteousness. Other signs of the new birth in this epistle are love of the brethren (4:7) and faith that Jesus is the Christ (5:1).

#### THE DYNAMIC REALITY OF THE NEW LIFE OF BELIEVERS (3:1-2)

Having become members of God's family through the new birth, this new life has deep significance for believers for the present as well as the future. John called on his readers to contemplate the amazing reality of present membership in God's family (v. 1a), reminded them that this explains the reaction of the world toward them (v. 1b), and stressed that this new life as God's children has present and future implications (v. 2).

The amazing love-gift (v. 1a). The aorist imperative "see" (ἴδετε with the accusative of the object of consideration) calls on the readers to take a heart-moving look at the amazing love which gave them membership in God's family. They should note carefully "how great a love" (ποταπὴν ἀγάπην) the Father has imparted to them. The adjective rendered "how great" (ποταπὴν), occurring only seven times in the New Testament,<sup>9</sup> implies a reaction of astonishment, and usually of admiration, on viewing some person or thing. The object of contemplation is God's "love" (ἀγάπην), a love that ever seeks

<sup>8</sup> William G. Moorhead, *Outline Studies in the New Testament, Catholic Epistles—James, I and II Peter, I, II, III John, and Jude* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1910), p. 104. It is well represented in the NASB rendering who practices." For a discussion of the Greek present tense see H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), pp. 181-86.

<sup>9</sup> It occurs in Matthew 8:27; Mark 13:1 (twice); Luke 1:29; 7:39; 2 Peter 3:11.

the true welfare of those loved. This love is indeed amazing when one remembers the destitution of those loved. This love works visible, transforming results in the lives of its recipients. The perfect tense "has bestowed" (δέδωκεν) marks the permanent gift; this love-gift corresponds to the permanent nature of the new birth (2:29). The added "upon us" (ἡμῖν), after John's directive to the readers, indicates that he included himself among the recipients of this amazing love. To see that love "aright is to sink down in adoration before it. It is beyond all comprehension."<sup>10</sup> In the original "the Father" stands at the end of the statement, giving emphasis to the fatherly character of the Giver and suggests the continuing, intimate relation He established in making believers His children.

The subordinate clause, "that we should be called children of God" (ἵνα τέκνα θεοῦ κληθῶμεν) explains what God's love does. The particle "that" (ἵνα) has been understood as conveying "the purpose of His love, its tendency and direction."<sup>11</sup> Addressed to those who have experienced the new birth, the clause is definitive and depicts the effect of God's love. The aorist verb "should be called" does not point to an anticipated future recognition as being God's "children," but expresses the fact, the passive indicating that the name was given by the Father Himself. He thus acknowledged their status as members of His family. Used without the article "children of God" calls attention to their character rather than their identity. The King James Version rendering "sons" does not adequately convey the original. "John does not stress the legal relationship of a son (υἱός) but the natural relationship of a child (τέκνον)."<sup>12</sup>

The words "and such are we" (καὶ ἐσμὲν) emphatically declare that believers are God's children not merely in name but also in reality. They express a ringing note of assurance, "and we are." As Cox remarks, "God does not call men His children until He makes them so. God's very nature, which is love, flows into the heart of the penitent believer and makes him a child of God."<sup>13</sup> These words are not in the King James Version, which follows the Textus Receptus. Divergent evaluations as to their authenticity are advanced. Some hold that they are "probably a scribal addition,"<sup>14</sup> while

<sup>10</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 449.

<sup>11</sup> A. Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (1883; reprint, Cambridge: University Press, 1938), p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> Donald W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p. 230.

<sup>13</sup> Leo G. Cox, "First, Second, and Third John," in *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), 6: 339-40.

<sup>14</sup> Zane C. Hodges, "1 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*,

others regard their absence in various manuscripts as due to "scribal oversight, perhaps occasioned by graphical similarity with the preceding word ... or to deliberate editorial pruning of an awkward parenthetical clause."<sup>15</sup> On the basis of the textual evidence,<sup>16</sup> textual scholars generally accept them as authentic.<sup>17</sup>

*The world's failure to understand believers* (v. 1b). The amazing fact of believers' membership in God's family explains the world's attitude toward them: "For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him." "For this reason" (διὰ τοῦτο, "because of this") points back to the fact that "children of God" are radically different from "the world" (ὁ κόσμος), the organized masses of lost humanity in their estrangement from God. As such the world "does not know us" (οὐ γινώσκει ἡμᾶς), is utterly unable to gain a true understanding of the believers' new nature. To the world the mystery of the new birth is incomprehensible (John 3:9-12); it can only regard as deluded those who testify that they have received a new nature.

Believers understand the world's failure "because it did not know Him" (οὐ γινώσκει ἡμᾶς). The aorist tense, "did not know" (ἔγνω) records the historical failure of the world to understand divine reality. The precise failure in view is determined by the identity of "Him." If "Him" is understood as a reference to God the Father, then John was summarily noting that "the world's whole course is one great act of non-recognition of God."<sup>18</sup> "The world through its wisdom did not come to know God" (1 Cor. 1:21). But others, like White, hold that the aorist tense more naturally refers to the Incarnate Christ.<sup>19</sup> The world failed to understand or receive God's supreme revelation of Himself in His Son (John 1:10-11). It haired and rejected Him. This helps explain the world's reaction to the Son's spiritual brothers and sisters. Barker notes,

ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), p. 893.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), pp. 711-12.

<sup>16</sup> For the textual evidence see Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, *The Greek New Testament*, 3d ed. (United Bible Societies, 1975), p. 817; Zane C. Hodges and Arthur L. Farstad, *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

<sup>17</sup> For a thorough discussion of the textual problem see J. Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 126-28.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 2: New Testament (Hartford, CT: S. S. Scranton Co., n.d.), p. 531.

<sup>19</sup> R. E. O. White, *Open Letter to Evangelicals: A Devotional and Homiletic Commentary on the First Epistle of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 248.

The author wants his readers to know that approval by the world is to be feared, not desired. To be hated by the world may be unpleasant, but ultimately it should reassure the members of the community of faith that they are loved by God, which is far more important than the world's hatred.<sup>20</sup>

*The implications of God's love-gift* (v. 2). Having enjoined his readers to contemplate God's love-gift, John then gave personal expression to that love by addressing them as "beloved" (Ἀγαπητοί) (cf. 2:7). The recipients of God's love are also loved by the apostle. He united his readers with himself in contemplating God's saving love in the present and the future: "Now are we children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be" (3:2a). The repeated assertion that "we are children of God," with the added time element "now" (νῦν), sets up the contrast with the future, again emphatically marked by "not ... yet" (οὐπω), while "and" (καὶ) links the two aspects of their new life as God's children. This God-imparted life "is not static but dynamic. A son grows, develops, matures. His goal of growth is maturity in the likeness of Christ Himself."<sup>21</sup> While rejoicing in the present reality of their new life, believers also look forward to the undisclosed future. They know that the best is yet to come! What that future holds "has not appeared as yet." The verb "appeared" (ἐφανερώθη), a favorite word with John,<sup>22</sup> sets forth that the believers' future has not yet received open, visible display. "A child of God," Lenski remarks, "is here and now, indeed like a diamond that is crystal white within but is still uncut and shows no brilliant flashes from reflecting facets."<sup>23</sup>

While the destiny of God's children has not yet been openly displayed, John gave confident expression to its essence: "We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him" (οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἐὰν φανερωθῆ ὅμοιοι αὐτῷ ἐσόμεθα). "We know" (οἶδαμεν) points to a well-assured recognition grounded in the very nature of the apostolic message. That display awaits a future undated event: "if He should appear" (ἐὰν φανερωθῆ). As in 2:28, the condition is again stated hypothetically, not that John had any question as to its certainty, but because the time, from the standpoint of those cherishing this hope, is entirely unknown. Neither John or his readers, like each generation

<sup>20</sup> Glenn W. Barker, "1 John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 12:330.

<sup>21</sup> Edward A. McDowell, "1-2-3 John," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 12:207.

<sup>22</sup> It occurs nine times in 1 John, nine times in the Fourth Gospel, and twice in the Book of Revelation.

<sup>23</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 452.

of believers since then, could be sure that it would occur during their lifetime. But the condition expresses an attitude of expectancy.

Since the subject of the verb "should appear" is unexpressed, views differ as to whether to render "He," referring to Christ, or "it" as referring back to "what we shall be." Interpreters differ in their preference,<sup>74</sup> but it seems more natural to understand "that John would identify the time of the believer's complete Christlikeness as being the second coming rather than the time when 'it is disclosed' (NEB)."<sup>25</sup>

Members of God's family are assured that whenever Christ returns "we shall be like Him" (ὅμοιοι αὐτῷ ἐσόμεθα). God's purpose to develop Christlikeness in all the members of His family will be fulfilled when Christ returns and all the children are "conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren (Rom. 8:29). The indwelling Holy Spirit is already at work in the lives of believers, inwardly transforming them into the moral image of the Lord of glory (2 Cor. 3:18); that transformation will be completed at the return of the glorified Christ, who will also "transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory" (Phil. 3:21). But this glorious assurance must not be misinterpreted to mean believers will become little gods. The adjective "like" (ὅμοιοι) denotes qualitative comparison, not equality. Burdick well remarks, "Believers can never be equal to Christ, since He is infinite and they are finite; but they can and will be similar to Him in holiness and in resurrection bodies."<sup>26</sup> As the incarnate Son of God, who died, and rose again in a glorified body, He will ever be distinct as "the first-born among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29), and the vast family of redeemed human beings, purified and transformed into His image, will ever "be to the praise of His glory" (Eph. 1:12).

The explanatory addition, "because we shall see Him just as He is" (ὅτι ὁψόμεθα αὐτὸν καθὼς ἐστίν), may indicate either the *reason* for assurance that believers shall be like Christ, or the *cause* of being like Him. In the former view "because" (ὅτι) is taken as introducing a dependent clause relating back to the main verb "we know," giving the sense, "we know that we shall be like Him, because we

<sup>24</sup> The rendering "it" is preferred by Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers* (Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), p. 1719; Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 121; and Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 452. The rendering "He" is preferred by Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, p. 98; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 172, note 29; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 51 (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1984), pp. 145-46; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, New Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 295, n. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 233.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

shall see Him." This assumes that only those who are like Christ will then see Him just as He really is. If the clause is connected with the immediately preceding words "we shall be like Him," John was explaining that the future face-to-face vision of Him will complete the transformation into His likeness. Thus the amazing assertion that "we shall be like Him" received the needed explanation. In the words of Bruce, "If progressive assimilation to the likeness of their Lord results from their present beholding of Him through a glass darkly, to behold Him face to face, to 'see Him even as He is,' will result in their being perfectly like Him."<sup>27</sup> The comparative adverb "just as" (καθώς) emphasizes that beholding Christ will no longer be the imperfect vision of seeing His reflection in a mirror but beholding our glorious Lord "face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12).

#### THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN HOPE ON PRESENT LIVING (v. 3)

John returned to the thought of 2:29 that the reality of the new birth reveals itself in daily conduct. Verse 3 states "an all-important corollary of the Christian hope."<sup>28</sup> The opening "and" (καὶ) marks the connection: "And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself" (καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἔχων τὴν ἐλπίδα ταύτην ἐπ' αὐτῷ ἀγνίζει ἑαυτὸν). The comprehensive "everyone" again allows for no exceptions for some elite group. The expression (πᾶς ὁ) occurs seven times in verses 3-15, suggesting that John was refuting some who claimed special privileges for themselves. John insisted that this purifying impact is true of "everyone who has this hope fixed on Him."

"This hope" (τὴν ἐλπίδα ταύτην), emphasized by the definite article and the demonstrative pronoun, summarizes verse 2. The word "hope," which occurs only here in the Johannine literature,<sup>29</sup> concerns the unseen future but does not imply uncertainty or mere probability. Christian hope is assured of future realization because it is grounded in the Person of Christ. The familiar, "Every man that hath this hope in him" (KJV), may be misunderstood as denoting a hope the believer harbors in his own heart. John's expression "on Him" (ἐπ' αὐτῷ) describes this hope as reaching out and resting "on Him" as its sure and unchanging foundation. It is based on the Person of our glorified Lord who has promised to come again.

John insisted that every individual who holds to this objective

<sup>27</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1975), p. 87.

<sup>28</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Row, 1946), p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> The noun "hope" occurs 53 times elsewhere in the New Testament. The verb "to hope" occurs only in John 5:45; 2 John 12; and 3 John 14 in the Johannine writings.

hope "purifies himself" (ἀγνίζει ἑαυτόν); he willingly and repeatedly exercises self-purification. In John 11:55, the only other occurrence of this verb in the Johannine writings, the reference is to ceremonial purification; here the term denotes inner moral purification. The present tense points to the repeated experience, while "himself" marks his consciousness of his own need for purification. Because of his hope he cannot live comfortably with sin. In 1 John 1:7 John stated that the blood of Christ cleanses, while here he wrote of self-purification. Both are true and necessary. As the begrimed workman must personally apply soap and water to be cleansed, so the believer must appropriate the God-given means of cleansing from the moral defilement that may have been incurred in daily life. Theology speaks of this repeated cleansing as "progressive sanctification" (cf. 2 Cor. 7:1). In 1 Peter 1:22 Peter used this verb in the perfect tense, "seeing ye have purified your souls in your obedience to the truth" (ASV) to denote the cleansing that took place at regeneration (cf. John 13:10; 15:3; 17:19). That initial purification with its transforming result is the necessary antecedent to this personal self-cleansing in daily experience. The more intimate the believer's fellowship with God, who is "light" (1 John 1:5), the more aware he is of his need to cleanse himself from all that is moral darkness (1:5-7). The more he contemplates this assured hope of being conformed to the image of Christ, the more eagerly he strives for present purity (Phil. 3:13-14).

The added words, "just as He is pure" (καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἀγνός ἐστιν) sets before the believer the pattern for self-purification. "He" renders the demonstrative pronoun, "that one" (ἐκεῖνος), referring to Christ. "We are not to judge our lives by other peoples," but by Christ's, who is the standard or goal toward which we are to move."<sup>30</sup> As a man among men, Jesus was "pure" (ἀγνός), morally blameless, uncontaminated and sinless in character and conduct. John did not say "just as He purified Himself," but rather "is pure," thus asserting His unchanging nature. As such He is the perfect Model, challenging believers constantly to purify themselves.

### **The Revelation from the Practice of Sin**

John now showed that the practice of sin is a serious matter which cannot be ignored. Since the false teachers seem to have held that knowledge was all-important and conduct did not matter, John insisted that sin and its practice is irreconcilable with the very nature of Christianity. He had already mentioned "sin" before (1:7-9;

<sup>30</sup> Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Epistles of John* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), p. 81.

2:2, 12), but now in 3:4-9 he mentioned the concept of sin no less than 10 times. He pointed out that the practice of sin reveals its true nature (vv. 4-5) and established the distinctness between the two classes of humanity (vv. 6-8a).

#### THE REVELATION OF THE NATURE OF SIN (vv. 4-5)

John stated that the nature of sin is lawlessness (v. 4) and is contrary to the very mission and character of Christ (v. 5).

*Sin as lawlessness* (v. 4). Again John made a statement that allows for no exceptions: "everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness" (πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν καὶ τὴν ἀνομίαν ποιεῖ). It pictures a class that is the opposite of those practicing righteousness (2:29). The articular present participle (ὁ ποιῶν) portrays an individual characteristically engaged in the practice of sin. Burdick notes that "the KJV translation, 'committeth,' is misleading in that it suggests a point of action rather than the continuing practice."<sup>31</sup> The definite article with both "sin" and "lawlessness" shows that John was thinking of two inclusive concepts rather than single occurrences. In classical Greek the word "sin" denoted "to miss, to fail, to fall short,"<sup>32</sup> but in the New Testament this negative meaning is largely lost sight of and sin is viewed as positive and active, a deliberate deviation from the standard of right. It is a willful rebellion, arising from the deliberate choice of the sinner. "Sin is the greatest tragedy of the entire universe. It's actually rebellion against God."<sup>33</sup> Thus by its very nature the practice of sin has the character of lawlessness.

The added clause, "and sin is lawlessness" (καὶ ἡ ἁμαρτία ἐστὶν ἡ ἀνομία), states the essential nature of sin. Since both nouns have the definite article, the terms are interchangeable. Sin by its very nature involves an element of lawlessness, and every form of lawlessness is sin. "Lawlessness" (ἀνομία) denotes not the absence of law but the willful rejection of the law, or the will of God, and the substitution of the will of self. It is thus the very opposite of righteousness, which is conformity to the standard or law of right.

Sin as incompatible with Christ's mission (v. 5). John's words "and you know" (καὶ οἶδατε) remind his readers that this further revelation of the nature of sin will be obvious to all those who have experienced the truth of the apostolic message about Christ's re-

<sup>31</sup> Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 236.

<sup>32</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), p. 72.

<sup>33</sup> Quinton J. Everest, *Messages from I John* (South Bend, IN: Your Worship Hour, 1982), p. 90.

demptive mission. The message, "that He appeared in order to take away sins" (ὅτι ἐκεῖνος ἐφανερωθῆναι τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἄρη), declared that the practice of sin is incompatible with Christ's mission. The use of the demonstrative pronoun "that one" (ἐκεῖνος) as the subject of the verb points back to the unique Person who "appeared" on the scene of human history. John did not say Christ "was born" but that He "appeared" or was made visible to human eyes. This implies His preexistence before His incarnate appearance among mankind. He appeared "in order to take away sins," literally, "the sins" (τὰς ἀμαρτίας), that is, the multitudinous acts of human sin. The plural is in keeping with John's concern with the practice of sin rather than the sinful inner nature prompting them.

Christ came "to take away" (ἄρη) those sins. The verb may mean "to lift and bear" or "to take away." The latter is the meaning here. That this involved His expiatory sacrifice on the cross is certain, but that is not the point here. In view is the effect of the atonement on human practice. Bultmann remarks that this stated purpose is parallel to the purpose in verse 8, "that He might destroy the works of the devil."<sup>34</sup>

The reading "to take away our sins" (KJV) follows the Textus Receptus (τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν ἄρη). The manuscript evidence for "our" is divided,<sup>35</sup> and it is not easy to decide whether it is authentic. If it is original, it adds to the forcefulness of John's reminder to the readers that the practice of sin is contrary to Christ's purpose for believers. For a professed believer to persist in the practice of sin shows that he is still spiritually blind to the purpose of Christ, or demonstrates that he willfully scorns and rejects the intention of Christ for him.

The added words, "and in Him there is no sin," underline the sinless nature of the Redeemer. As "righteous" (2:1) and "pure" (3:3), He who opposes sins in the lives of His people is Himself without sin. His sinlessness, Smalley observes, "was a feature of his existence to which Christian witness was constantly borne (in the NT, see 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:21-22; cf. John 8:46; Heb. 7:26; 1 Pet. 3:18)."<sup>36</sup> As such He is the perfect Pattern of what the child of God should be.

#### THE REVELATION OF TWO DISTINCT CLASSES OF HUMANITY (vv. 6-8a)

Viewed in the light of Christ's mission (v. 5), the moral quality of their habitual conduct reveals two distinct classes of humanity.

<sup>34</sup> Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, p. 51.

<sup>35</sup> For the textual evidence see Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed.

<sup>36</sup> Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 157.

John wrote of their contrasted conduct (v. 6) and thus established their distinctive character (vv. 7-8a).

*The practice of the two classes* (v. 6). The distinctive practice of the two classes is tersely stated: "No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him." In both statements "no one" (literally, "everyone" combined with the negative,  $\pi\alpha\varsigma \delta\acute{\omicron} . . . \omicron\upsilon\chi$ ) marks a distinct group with no exceptions.

Everyone in the first class is characterized as "one who abides in Him" ( $\pi\alpha\varsigma \delta\acute{\omicron} \acute{\epsilon}\nu \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\omega} \mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omega\nu$ , "every one in Him abiding"). The position of "in Him" between the article and the participle marks his intimate relationship with Christ as an essential part of his identity, while the present tense participle denotes the on-going relationship being maintained. To "abide in Christ means to "obey" Him (John 15:10). Of such a one John asserted that "not he sins" ( $\omicron\upsilon\chi \acute{\alpha}\mu\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\alpha}\nu\epsilon\iota$ ); he does not continue in willful, habitual sin. John already indicated that the believer cannot claim never to commit an act of sin (1:8-9; 2:1). Sin may enter his experience as an exception needing confession and cleansing; he is not at liberty to make occasional excursions into sin, but must seek to avoid any lapses into sin. John's apparently contradictory statements concerning sin and the believer reflect the inner tension Paul discussed in Romans 7.

On the other hand, "no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him." The construction again depicts a distinct class, all characterized by the practice of sin as the ruling principle of their lives. Of each one in this class John asserted that he has not "seen Him," has never experienced a dynamic visual encounter with Christ, nor "knows Him," has never gained an intimate acquaintance with Him. The two negations are not identical in meaning. "To see a person is to view his external likeness, but to know a person is to become familiar with the characteristics of his personality."<sup>37</sup> The first verb, "has seen" ( $\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\omega}\rho\alpha\kappa\epsilon\nu$ ), here does not refer to a literal seeing of Jesus in the flesh, as in 1 John 1:2-3, but denotes a spiritual vision of Him through faith (cf. Eph. 1:18; Heb. 11:27).

The character of the two classes (vv. 7-8a). The moral identity of each group is established by their characteristic conduct. John first expressed a pastoral warning (v. 7a) and then presented a clear character evaluation of each group (vv. 7b-8a).

The tender address directed to the readers, "little children" ( $\tau\epsilon\kappa\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ ; see 2:1, 12), appeals to their consciousness that they are members of God's family. The warning, "let no one deceive you" ( $\mu\eta\delta\epsilon\iota\varsigma \pi\lambda\alpha\nu\acute{\alpha}\tau\omega \acute{\upsilon}\mu\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ ), calls on them to be alert constantly to the danger from the false teachers, apparently those who had left their assemblies

<sup>37</sup> Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 240.

(2:19) but were aggressively promulgating their false views. While the negative (μή) with the present imperative generally calls for cessation of an action already in progress, John did not mean that his readers were already being deceived. He called on them to be alert against the danger. In 2:26 the warning was against doctrinal deception; here the warning is against moral deception. John well knew that "the false teachers with their sophistry were capable not merely of condoning sin, but of making it seem virtuous."<sup>38</sup> To avoid deception they needed to discern the moral identity of the individual.

The criterion for a true believer is stated in the words, "the one who practices righteousness is righteous" (ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην δίκαιός ἐστιν). The test is not the believer's performance of an occasional righteous deed, but rather his habitual practice of "righteousness," literally, "the righteousness" which is the product of the new birth (cf. 2:29). The practice of righteousness does not make him righteous but reveals his inner nature. It is the test of Matthew 7:16, "you will know them by their fruits." It refutes any claim by the heretical teachers to be righteous because of their professed esoteric knowledge.

The opposite is also true: "the one who practices sin is of the devil" (ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστίν). The practice of sin also reveals family identity. One who practices "the sin," as marking the realm of the devil, thereby reveals his diabolical nature. John did not say such a one is "born of the devil" (contrast 2:29), but "is of the devil." The "of" (ἐκ) denotes source, not of his existence, but of the evil that dominates his life and practice (John 8:41-44). By neglecting and rejecting the moral requirements of God's Word the heretics clearly revealed that their priorities were rooted in the realm of the devil.

The words, "for the devil has sinned from the beginning" (ὅτι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ὁ διάβολος ἁμαρτάνει), explain why the practice of sin is diabolical; he is its originator. The phrase "from the beginning," placed emphatically forward, does not mean from the beginning of the devil's existence; that would make God responsible for this evil being. It rather points back to that primeval disaster when this august being arose in self-willed rebellion against God and thus became the arch-opponent of God and His good purposes.<sup>39</sup> Ever since his fall the devil "has sinned" (ἁμαρτάνει), "goes on sinning" as his unceasing activity.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 91.

<sup>39</sup> For a survey of the biblical picture of the devil see *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Satan," by D. Edmond Hiebert, 5:282-86.

### The Deliverance from the Practice of Sin

The nature and results of sin make inevitable God's opposition to sin and the work of the devil. John wrote of the divine provision for deliverance from sin (v. 8b) and the human experience of deliverance through the new birth (v. 9).

#### DIVINE PROVISION FOR DELIVERANCE FROM SIN (v. 8b)

Deliverance from sin is grounded in the work of the incarnate Son of God. God took the initiative: "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil." The distinctive title, "the Son of God," underlines the true identity of the One who "appeared" to crush the power of Satan and sin. The verb "appeared," indicating His visible manifestation in the Incarnation, points back to His preexistence as the eternal Son of God. His identity marks the supernatural struggle involved in God's purpose "that He might destroy the works of the devil." His work was not accomplished through a dramatic act of divine omnipotence, but rather was wrought by the incarnate Son who identified Himself with mankind in taking on Himself human nature to be their Deliverer.

The stated purpose, "that He might destroy the works of the devil" (ἵνα λύσῃ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ διαβόλου), presents Christ's redemptive mission as it relates to that great spiritual antagonist of God and Mankind. The plural "the works" points to the massive activities of the devil in leading human beings into sin. All those works have a certain coherence as being prompted by satanic hatred and rebellion against God. The aorist verb "might destroy" (λύσῃ) implies a decisive occurrence and seems naturally to refer to Christ's victory over the devil on the cross (John 12:31; Heb. 2:14). The verb does not mean "to annihilate" but variously means "to loose, untie, break up, give release," as when the disciples loosed the colt in Matthew 21:2. In His victory over the devil on the cross Christ broke the chains of sin whereby the devil had brought mankind under his domination (Heb. 2:14-15). This undoing of the devil's works in breaking the power of sin was effectively initiated at Calvary, is now going forward through the Spirit-empowered preaching of the gospel, and will be consummated at Christ's return and the incarceration of the devil (Rev. 20:1-3).

#### HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF DELIVERANCE THROUGH THE NEW BIRTH (v. 9)

John gave a double statement of the human experience of deliverance from sin as Christ's provision is apprehended and appropriated by faith. The first statement, "no one who is born of God practices sin" (πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ, literally, "Everyone having been born of God sin not is doing"), again

expresses a universal with no exceptions. The articular perfect passive participle (ὁ γεγεννημένος) points to the individual's experience of the new birth with the result that he is now a newborn being. The full phrase "born of God" occurs here in 1 John for the first time (cf. 2:29, "born of Him") and is repeatedly used hereafter. Concerning everyone who is such a born-again individual John asserted, "sin not he is doing" (Gr.). The NASB rendering "practices" adequately gives the meaning. It is a restatement of verse 6. There the believer's abiding in Christ explains his conduct; here it is his new nature.

John explained what has happened: "because His seed abides in him" (ὅτι σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ μένει). The indwelling of "His seed" motivates the believer's moral conduct. The metaphorical designation "His seed" is variously understood. It may be taken to denote the Word of God, or the gospel, as the regenerating agent that produces the new birth (cf. James 1:18, 21; 1 Pet. 1:23-25).<sup>40</sup> Others take the term more generally as designating the divine principle of life, the new birth, which God implants in the believer.<sup>41</sup> Still others hold that the reference is to the Holy Spirit as the life-giving Agent.<sup>42</sup> Though the term "seed" is not elsewhere directly used of the Holy Spirit, this view is in keeping with John 3:5-8, where Jesus associated the Holy Spirit with the new birth, and the fact that "He is also the producer of Christian character in the believer (2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 5:22-23)."<sup>43</sup> In view of these varied views Smalley holds that "the most satisfactory exegesis of this passage is one which brings together the two concepts of 'word' and 'Spirit.'"<sup>44</sup> Obviously the Word of God is the life-giving means which the Holy Spirit uses to implant and develop the new nature in the believer.

John further stated of the believer, "and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (καὶ οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν, ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται). It is often felt that these words are difficult, or even inconsistent with John's teaching in 1:8-2:3, as well as the experience of the most saintly believer. John's stated impossibility is grounded in the moral incongruity between the practice of sin and the nature of

<sup>40</sup> Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, pp. 77-78; William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 94; Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 463.

<sup>41</sup> Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, p. 107; Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 92; Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, p. 303.

<sup>42</sup> Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 247; A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1912), p. 89.

<sup>43</sup> Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 247.

<sup>44</sup> Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 173.

the divinely bestowed new birth. Here again the force of the present tenses as suggesting habitual practice must be kept in view. This moral incompatibility between sin and the new birth reflects the conflict between God and the devil. The new birth inevitably implants this conflict between the two powers into the experience of the believer. As Bruce observes,

The new birth involves a radical change in human nature; for those who have not experienced it, sin is natural, whereas for those who have experienced it, sin is unnatural—so unnatural, indeed, that its practice constitutes a powerful refutation of any claim to possess the divine life. John's antitheses are clear-cut. While they are to be understood in the context of his letter and of the situation which it presupposes, any attempt to weaken them out of regard for human infirmity, or to make them less sharp and uncompromising than they are, is to misinterpret them.<sup>45</sup>

John's present tense "he cannot sin" (οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν) does not declare a perfectionism that insists that the believer no longer commits an act of sin. Rather, as Barclay, states, He is demanding a life which is ever on the watch against sin, a life which ever fights the battle of goodness, a life which has never surrendered to sin, a life in which sin is not the permanent state, but only the temporary aberration, a life in which sin is not the normal accepted way, but the abnormal moment of defeat.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Sign of the Children of God and the Children of the Devil**

In verses 10-11 John restated the sign of the children of God and the children of the devil and emphasized the significance of brother-love. In verse 12 he appended the negative illustration of Cain.

#### THE CRITERIA FOR THE TWO CLASSES OF HUMANITY (vv. 10-11)

The words, "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious," mark a summary of the discussion of the two classes of mankind. "By this" (ἐν τούτῳ) may refer either to what precedes or what follows. The plural adjective "obvious" (φανερὰ), meaning "visible, plainly to be seen," calls attention to the visible deeds of each group as establishing their spiritual parentage. "A man's principles are invisible," Plummer notes, "but their results are visible."<sup>47</sup> This test reveals only two classes, "the children of God and the children of the devil." John knew of no intermediate class.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 92.

<sup>46</sup> Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>47</sup> Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 128.

The children of the devil (v. 10b). The designation, "children of the devil," occurs only here in the New Testament (but compare "son of the devil" [Acts 13:10] and "your father the devil" [John 8:44] as synonymous). "Of the devil" (τοῦ διαβόλου) does not mean unbelievers owe their existence to the devil, but rather that "a creature endowed with free will can choose his own parent in the moral world"<sup>48</sup> (cf. John 1:12).

John restated the evidence from personal conduct: "Anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God" (πᾶς ὁ μὴ ποιῶν δικαιοσύνην οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ). The universal negation allows for no exceptions. His deeds lack the quality of righteousness.

The added characterization, "nor the one who does not love his brother" (καὶ ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ) makes clear that the love of the brethren is an important aspect of the practice of righteousness. Love is righteousness in relation to others: "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Gal. 5:14, KJV). "His brother" here denotes a fellow believer. His failure to love another member of the family was tangible evidence that he lacked the inner bond uniting the members of the family. He was motivated by a different spirit.

*The children of God* (v. 11). The opening word "For" (ὅτι) introduces a verification of the preceding negative assertion. The absence of love in the life of a professed believer, is inconsistent with the apostolic message proclaimed to them. That message declared "that we should love one another" (ἵνα ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους), that the practice of mutual love was fundamental to the Christian faith. The reciprocal pronoun "one another" (ἀλλήλους) stresses the mutual operation of love in social relations, each lovingly seeking the welfare of the other. It was the command of Christ Himself (John 15:12, 17).

#### THE NEGATIVE ILLUSTRATION OF CAIN (v. 12)

John cited the illustration of Cain as evidence that absence of love marks a child of the devil. This is the only reference to an Old Testament event in John's epistles. It established that love and hatred, characterizing the children of God and the children of the devil, have been operative since the earliest days of human history.

The opening negative, "not as Cain, who was of the evil one," introduces a contrast to verse 11. Cain is identified as "of the evil one" (ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ), another name for the devil marking his malignant and destructive nature. Cain "drew his inspiration from the evil one, the devil, who is himself the archetypal murderer (Jn. 8:46)."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 189.

Cain's evil deed, "and slew his brother," demonstrated his evil character. The verb "slew" (ἐσφάξεν) portrays the violence of his action. It occurs in the New Testament only here and in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 5:6, 9, 12; 6:4, 9; 13:3, 8; 18:24). Used of the slaying of sacrificial animals, it points out the coldblooded, vicious action of Cain.

John's unexpected rhetorical question, "And for what reason did he slay him?" elicits the motive for his vicious deed. It brings out more strongly the diabolical nature of the act and its agent. John's own answer, "Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous," stresses the contrast between the deeds of the two brothers as manifestations of their character. The righteous deeds of Abel evoked Cain's jealousy and hatred and led to murder. "Jealousy-hatred-murder is a natural and terrible sequence."<sup>50</sup>

It is still true the believer's righteous character and conduct arouse the world's hatred. And, as in the case of Cain, that hatred is often expressed in vicious and violent action against the righteous.

<sup>50</sup> J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 140.

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