

Who Are the Children of God?

1 John: Am I Really a Christian?¹

1 John 2:28-3:10

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Love struck

On Friday, Pastor Dick sent me an email with a quote by Jay Leno that read, “Today is Valentine’s Day—or, as men like to call it, Extortion Day.” Did you know that Valentine’s Day is an \$18 billion industry? Did you know that 62% of Americans participate in the holiday in one way or another? There are about one billion cards purchased each year, 35 million boxes of chocolates sold, 220 million roses produced, \$4 billion spent on jewelry, and around six million people who get engaged on February 14th.

Now, I’m not saying we shouldn’t celebrate Valentine’s Day. Some of you were engaged on Valentine’s Day. Some of you were married on Valentine’s Day. Not to mention that all of us guys need all the help we can get. We need to be reminded to intentionally show our loved ones that we actually love them. But where did all of this come from? I’m sure some of the guys here would like to know.

According to my in depth research—I mean, according to Wikipedia—Valentine’s Day began in the third century. Originally it was a pagan fertility festival known as Lupercalia. It really has nothing to do with what we do today (or at least I hope it doesn’t). The men would sacrifice a couple of animals, like a dog and a goat, and then make their hides into whips. The women would then line up to be whipped by the men. They thought this would make them more fertile in the coming year.

In the fifth century Pope Gelasius transformed this pagan holiday into a Christian Feast Day to celebrate St. Valentine. Valentine was a priest during the reign of Emperor Claudius. Claudius put a ban on marriage because he thought marriage made men weaker soldiers. But Father Valentine continued to perform weddings for young couples secretly. According to legend, when he was found out, Claudius had St. Valentine executed on February 14th.

By the fifteenth century this feast day became a popular holiday in the UK and lovers began exchanging love notes on Valentine’s Day. By the 1840s America began mass producing Valentine’s Day cards. And the rest, as they say, is history.

When I began my “research” on Valentine’s Day, the thing that interested me most was the connection between Valentine’s Day and Cupid. In ancient mythology, Cupid is the god of love. So as Valentine’s Day became the day of love, Cupid became an iconic figure associated with it.

Cupid’s name means desire. According to mythology, when a person is struck by one of Cupid’s golden arrows they are filled with an uncontrollable desire for another person. But what you may not know is that Cupid had two different types of arrows in his quiver. In addition to his arrows of gold, he also had arrows of lead. And if a person was struck by one of Cupid’s lead tipped arrows they would be filled with a different kind of desire—a desire to flee from a person, an aversion to that person.

¹ The title of this series is borrowed from the title of Mike McKinley’s book, *Am I Really a Christian?*

I found this interesting because it paints a picture of something critical in our passage this morning. The love of God is marvelous. And when our hearts are struck with the golden arrow of God's love, it fills us with an unquenchable desire to love God in return. And that love will show itself, not in giving flowers to God, but in righteousness or obedience. But if our hearts aren't struck with the love of God there will be no love for God. Those who don't know the love of God are like those with an arrow of lead in their hearts. Instead of loving God, they run from God; they have an aversion toward God.

This is really at the heart of our passage this morning. Do you have a heart that is filled with a desire for God or a heart filled with an aversion toward God and his ways? Are you a child of God who has come to know the love of God? And does the love of God produce a love for God that shows itself in righteousness?

Turn in your Bibles to 1 John 2:28-3:10.

1 John 2:28-3:10²

^{2:28} *And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. ²⁹If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.*

^{3:1} *See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.*

⁴*Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. ⁸Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. ¹⁰By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The main question before us this morning is “Who are the children of God?” Or how do you distinguish true Christians from false ones?³ In our study of 1 John we've been asking a question: “Am I really a Christian?” And we've learned that to answer that question we must examine ourselves with three tests.

- The theological test: Do you believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?
- The social test: Does your trust in Christ result in a transformed love?
- And the moral test: Does your trust in Christ result in a transformed life?

Our text this morning deals with the moral test. How do you know you're a child of God, born of God, etc.? The overwhelming answer of our passage is you'll know you're a child of God if you practice righteousness.

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

³ Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*.

This is my sermon in a sentence. The children of God will practice righteousness. This is the main point of the passage.

We're told that explicitly in verse 29. "...you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness *has been born of him.*" In verse 6: "No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or *known him.*" Verse 7: "Whoever practices righteousness *is righteous*, as he is righteous." Verse 9: "No one *born of God* makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been *born of God.*" And verse 10: "By this it is evident who are *the children of God* and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God..."

The children of God are those who practice righteousness. In our passage, this is the distinguishing mark between true Christians and false ones. But our text does more than tell us the children of God are those who practice righteousness. Our text answers two questions:

- What motivates righteousness in the children of God? (2:28-3:3)
- And what produces righteousness in the children of God? (3:4-10)

I'd like to spend the rest of our time this morning answering these questions.

THE CHILDREN OF GOD HAVE HOPE. (2:28-3:3)

First, what motivates righteousness in the children of God? The children of God have hope. And the children of God have hope in two things.

Hope in judgment

First of all, they have hope in judgment. When Christ appears in judgment, the children of God can have confidence (cf. 4:17). They don't have to shrink from Christ in shame at his coming. The reason they don't have to be ashamed is because they are righteous (cf. 3:7).

The first place we see people shrinking in shame is in the garden. Adam and Eve sinned and they became aware of their nakedness. So they hid from God. But those of us who are in Christ have been clothed. We're told two times in our passage that Christ is righteous (2:29; 3:7). Those who abide in Christ are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Therefore, when judgment comes, God will look at us and see the righteousness of Christ, instead of our sinful filthiness. Therefore, we can have confidence at the coming judgment because we're righteous in Christ!

Hope for glorification

The second thing children of God have hope in is a hope for glorification. 1 John 3:1 is one of the most loved verses in the Bible. "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." In John 1:12 we're told that all of those who receive Christ (by faith) are children of God. Those who believe the gospel have been born again, born of God (Jn. 1:13). We're in God's family.

But not only do we belong to God. Look at verse 2. "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we *will be* has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." The children of God are those who practice righteousness. But as we'll see, in this life, we do that imperfectly. But when Christ returns, we will be fully righteous. We'll be like

Christ. As we struggle in this life to practice righteousness, we do so with the hope that one day we will be like Christ. This is what the Bible calls glorification (cf. Rom. 8:30).

Oaks of righteousness

Picture a beautiful, glorious oak tree. Christ is like the perfect oak tree, an oak of righteousness. Most of our righteousness doesn't look like Christ's righteousness right now. But on the day when Christ appears, we shall be like him.

I have four oak trees in my yard, two in the front and two in the back. And they drop tons of acorns every fall. Most of those acorns don't take root. But one of the oak trees in my back yard is actually a tree that sprung up along the fence, where an acorn fell. It was so close to the fence that the mower never knocked it down. It's a small tree in many respects—about 10 feet—but it is growing every year. By the time my kids are out of the house, that tree will be almost as big as the other oak tree in my back yard.

Most of our righteousness doesn't look anything like the righteousness of Christ. It looks more like an acorn or maybe like a small sapling. But if we are truly in him, if our growth is the result of an "acorn that dropped from Christ's tree," it will continue to grow. And one day—actually, on the day when he appears—we will be like him. This is the hope we have in Christ.

Hope motivates

And this hope actually motivates us to practice righteousness. Look at verse 3. "And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." One of the keys to growth in the Christian life is an eternal perspective. Keeping our eyes fixed on the last day informs how we live today. Our motivation to practice righteousness comes from the hope we have as children of God.

THE CHILDREN OF GOD ABIDE IN CHRIST. (3:4-10)

But what fuels/produces our practice of righteousness? That's our second question. The answer is simple. The children of God abide in Christ. In the beginning of our passage, we're commanded to abide in Christ (v. 28). And as we saw last week this means that we are to remain in communion with Christ through remaining in the gospel. I posted a number of resources on the church blog last week⁴ to help you know learn more about how to remain in the gospel practically. I'd encourage you to look at those resources. The children of God are to abide in Christ

But we're also told in verses 6 and 9 that Christ *does* abide in the children of God now. And because Christ abides in us *now* we won't keep on sinning. On the flip side of that coin, if Christ abides in us now, we will practice righteousness. That's what produces righteousness in the children of God.

Defining legalism

My guess is this sermon series has made some of you a little uncomfortable. You may be wondering if I'm saying that good works save you. I've heard that some of you think these messages are legalistic. Well, let me start by saying, our good works don't save us. And our good works don't make us secure. The blood of Jesus is what cleanses us from all sin (1:7). And it is the work of Christ that secures our salvation. But the salvation that comes from Christ will produce good works.

⁴ <http://www.firstfreewichita.org/blog/post/marinating-in-the-gospel>

Legalism is when you believe your works are what earn you favor with God. John is saying something different. And I am saying something different. John is saying that Christ's work is what earns us God's favor. In 2:2, we're told Christ is the propitiation for our sin.

In other words, Christ's perfect life and death serve as a substitute for us. And Christ's perfect life and perfect death are what earn us God's favor. The word propitiation means to make God favorable toward us.⁵ And our good works will flow *out of* God's favor. And they will be evidence of our salvation.

So our security comes from the work of God in Christ. But the evidence of our salvation *is* linked to our good works. Therefore, our good works are part of our assurance of salvation. They don't secure salvation. But they show evidence of salvation; therefore, they can assure us of salvation.

The root of regeneration produces the fruit of righteousness

Our salvation produces fruit. That's what we learn in 1 John. Look at verse 7. "Whoever practices righteousness *is* righteous as he is righteous." Those who are made righteous by Jesus Christ—the righteous one—will practice righteousness. The root of who we are produces the fruit of what we do. Children of God will practice righteousness because Christ abides in them. And children of God will not produce sinfulness because God's seed abides in them. Look at verse 9.

"No one born of God
 makes a practice of sinning
 for God's seed abides in him,
 and he cannot keep on sinning
 because he has been born of God"

Do you see the parallel argument?⁶ The seed being spoken of, at the heart of this verse, is the seed of regeneration by the Holy Spirit.⁷ It is the Holy Spirit that makes a person born again, a child of God. And because the seed of the Holy Spirit continues to abide in a child of God, they cannot keep on sinning.

The root of regeneration produces the fruit of righteousness. Those who are born of God will continue to walk with God, they will obey his commands, and they will love other believers.⁸ A Holy Spirit acorn from Christ's tree will bear fruit. It won't produce thorns (cf. Mt. 7:15-20; Jas. 3:12).

An apparent contradiction

But the minute we say this we run into a problem, because we all continue to sin. So does that mean that none of us are really Christians?

There is an apparent contradiction in 1 John. In chapter 1, we're told that "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (v. 8). We all sin. And we are told we need to "confess our sins," knowing that God is "faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (v. 9). But then in chapter 3, we're told that "no one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he *cannot* keep on sinning because he has been born of God" (v. 9).

⁵ D.A. Carson, "The Center of the Whole Bible," in *Scandalous*, pp. 60-66.

⁶ Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ These are the three things that are meant by righteousness according to Kruse.

Well which is it? Do true Christians continue to sin or do true Christians not continue to sin? I think it is plain that true Christians continue to sin. So what then does John mean when he says that children of God cannot keep on sinning? I think it has to do with what *kind* of sin John is talking about in chapter 3. We all continue to sin, but there is a certain kind of sin that proves people are not children of God? There is a certain kind of sin that proves that people are children of the devil, as verse 8 says. What is it?

There have been a number of answers given to this question. And to be honest, none of them are completely satisfying.⁹ But I want to list the two views that I find most plausible.

Habitual Sin?

The most common view is that John is talking about habitual sin in chapter 3.¹⁰ According to this view, true Christians will continue to sin occasionally, but they won't make a habit of sinning.¹¹ Those who make a habit of sinning prove they are not a child of God. They prove they're a child of the devil. They won't continue in the same old sins over and over again with no progress. This is the view I held before I studied this passage. And I think it is an acceptable view.

This view is based on looking at the present tense of the verbs.¹² In verse 4: "everyone who *makes a practice* of sinning also practices lawlessness." In verse 6: "No one who abides in him *keeps on* sinning; no one who *keeps on* sinning has either seen him or known him." In verse 8: "Whoever *makes a practice* of sinning is of the devil." In verse 9: "No one born of God *makes a practice* of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot *keep on* sinning because he has been born of God."

So according to this view, the present tense of the verbs refers to ongoing habitual sin. This view is very attractive. If a person that shows no fruit or no change in their lives, they cannot have assurance of salvation.

But there is a challenge with this view. The tense of the verbs alone can't tell us the habitual sin of an unbeliever is in view.¹³ And if you turn over to 5:16 you see this same present tense verb being used to describe a believer. "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin [making a practice of sinning] not leading to death he shall ask and God will give him life..." This verse is clearly referring to a true believer; a "brother" in Christ. Yet this verse says this brother is "committing a sin." This is the same verb and in the same tense as we see in chapter 3 translated as "makes a practice of sinning."¹⁴

That's why I no longer think that the sin that a true believer cannot commit is referring to habitual sin. But it is the most common view.

Sin as rebellion?

There is another view which I find more plausible. This view states that the sin a child of God cannot commit is the sin of rebellion.

⁹ Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*.

¹⁰ This is the view of John Stott.

¹¹ Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*.

¹² Cf. Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*; and John Stott, *The Letters of John*.

¹³ Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*.

¹⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*.

In verse 4, we're told that "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning *also* practices lawlessness; sin *is* lawlessness." Well what is lawlessness? That may give us a clue as to what kind of sin a child of God cannot commit. "Lawlessness" is probably not the best translation.

The Greek word translated here as "lawlessness" can refer to satanic associations (in LXX). It can refer to an opposition to God (cf. Mt. 7:23; 13:41). It can refer to a sinful power at work in the world that Christians should not submit to (Rm. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:14; 2 Thess. 2:3, 7).

So the word which is here translated as "lawlessness" doesn't refer to breaking the law or ongoing acts of committing sins. It refers to a disposition which is against God. It refers to an inward reality. The sin being spoken of here is a sin that flows out of a heart that is cold toward God, and his ways. It refers to iniquity. It refers to rebellion.¹⁵ It is ultimately the sin of rejecting Christ.¹⁶ And this sin of rebellion produces all kinds of sin. The sin of rebellion is the root problem.

The root of rebellion produces the fruit of sin

And the root of rebellion produces the fruit of sin—the kind of sin that cannot be true of true believers.

This matches what we see in the rest of the passage. In our passage there is an intimate connection between what's inside of us and what comes out of us, or between who we are and what we do. In verse 3, we're told, "everyone who thus hopes in [Christ] [internal] purifies himself [external]." In verse 6, "no one who abides in [Christ] [internal] keeps on sinning [external]. No one who keeps on sinning [external] has either seen [Christ] or known him [internal]." In verse 7, "whoever practices righteousness [external] is righteous as [Christ] is righteous [internal]." In verse 8, "Whoever makes a practice of sinning [external] is of the devil [internal]." The external behavior results from an internal rebellion to God—just like the devil who has been "sinning" (or rebelling) from the beginning. In verse 9, "no one born of God [internal] makes a practice of sinning [external]." In verse 10, "Whoever does not practice righteousness [external] is not of God [internal]."

So in verse 4, "everyone who makes a practice of sinning [external] also practices lawlessness"—that is inward rebellion. The one whose heart is inwardly rebellious toward Christ produces a kind of sin that a child of God cannot commit.

It's like we said when we began. The one who has been struck by the golden arrow of God's love will in turn show a love for God. And the nature of that love will be consistent with who he is. It will be righteous. But the one who practices sinning shows that he has a heart full of lead. He has a heart that has an aversion toward God—a heart that flees from God and his ways.

The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.

So the heart of the matter is a matter of the heart. Has your heart been love struck? If you have been struck by the love of God truly, it will produce a love for God! And a love for God will always show itself. You will desire to do his will. Has your heart been struck by the love of God? Or is your heart full of lead? We will all continue to sin. But when you sin, what's going on in your heart? Do you hate sin and love Christ? Or do you really love sin and rebel against Christ?

The children of God practice righteousness. The root of regeneration will produce the fruit of righteousness, not rebellion. And there will be evidence of this fruit. It won't be perfect now. But

¹⁵ This view/argument comes from de la Potterie in Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*.

¹⁶ de la Potterie in Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*.

there will be evidence of righteousness now as we await Christ's return. Part of the evidence will actually be a love of righteousness and a love of the righteous One.

But what if your life doesn't bear fruit? What should you do? Trust Christ!

Children of God will practice righteousness. So if you are not practicing righteousness it is an indication that you may not be a child of God. But there's the good news this morning. If you trust Christ, the one who shed his blood for your unrighteousness, then God has given you the right to become a child of God. Children not born of human decision or the will of man, but born of God. And all who are born of God will bear fruit.

The answer is not to try and staple fake fruit onto your fake tree. That's legalism. The answer is to look to Christ; to receive Christ and become a child of God. Our love *for* God must flow out of receiving the love *of* God in Christ. We love because he first loved us (4:19).

Benediction

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

¹⁶Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

References

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Children of God may refer to: People of God, a religious concept. Divine filiation, the Christian concept of becoming a child of God. The New Forest Shakers, an 1870s and 1880s English religious sect also known as the "Children of God". The Family International, a US religious sect originally known as the "Children of God". Children of God (novel), a 1998 science fiction novel by Mary Doria Russell. Children of God (film), a 2010 film directed and written by Kareem Mortimer. GOD'S WORD® Translation Certainly, all who are guided by God's Spirit are God's children. International Standard Version For all who are led by God's Spirit are God's children. Literal Standard Version for as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. Romans 8:19 The creation waits in eager expectation for the revelation of the sons of God. Romans 9:8 So it is not the children of the flesh who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as offspring. Romans 9:26 and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not My people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" 2 Corinthians 6:18 And: "I will be a Father to you, and you will be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Who are God's children? Apparently not so easy. At least not for some. Baptist Pastors Won't Hear Ben Carson after Young Pastors Object. That the answer to this question isn't all of us raises a couple interesting questions. Which of us are not God's children? Whose children are we? The "problem". If we aren't children of God whose child are we? In Genesis, we read. Ge 1:26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." Would some children be "manifest" as spiritual sons of God while others would become perfect fleshly sons of God? Is this a Scripture that gives us the basis for considering that all Christians, whether they are rewarded with heavenly or earthly life, are still called God's children? Does the designation of "son of God" hang on one's reward and final destination? Of course, the foregoing is not proof that the other sheep that Jesus refers to are the Gentile Christians who would begin to be united to the Christian congregation from 36 C.E. onward. It does not appear that we can prove beyond a doubt who the other sheep are. All we can do is go with the most likely scenario, one which harmonizes with the rest of Scripture. The Children of God are often called "youths". Why? because they don't mess with the sexual energy. They don't waste their creative force, but conserve it within the body. That is the end-point of the evolutionary process. Evolution is not so much about the evolution of physical forms, as Darwin would have us believe. But it is a dipping into matter "Involution" followed by a rising up out of matter "Evolution. It's more about the mind than the physical body.