

1 John Chapter 3 (vv.4-18)

John has spoken, for the first time, of those who are 'born of God' (2.29). The second *major* section of the epistle (3.1-4.21) begins with a short digression (3.1-3), after which John discusses the evidence that accompanies **new birth**. Again, the evidence will be threefold: *moral* (3.1-10), *devotional* (3.11-24) and *doctrinal* (4.1-6). In this 'moral' section (3.1-10), it is *doing* (habitually) righteousness which distinguishes the children of God from the children of the devil.

The Practice of Sin versus Righteousness [3.4-10]

v.4: The false teachers overemphasised *knowledge* at the expense of *conduct*. The way a person lived was not all important to them. John dispels this myth by explaining that what a person **does** (conduct) declares what a person **is** (by nature, v.7). First, John speaks of a person that 'committeth sin' habitually – the *present continuous* tense suggesting what is characteristic of the person's life. Such a person 'doeth lawlessness' for 'sin is lawlessness', i.e. to do as I like (self-will) without regard for the will or word of God. It is active rebellion and defiance of God – the refusal of any duty Godward (Titus 2.4). **v.5:** But, thank God, Christ was manifested to take away our sins – and thus the committing of sin cannot be trivialised! It is incompatible and inconsistent with knowing Christ and denies the purpose for which He came into the world. We 'know' that Christ was 'manifested' (made visible to human eyes). Paul tells us how He was manifested (Romans 8.3; 1 Timothy 3.16; Hebrews 2.14); Peter tells us when and for whom He was manifested (1 Peter 1.20); John tells us why He was manifested – to deal with sins *and* the devil (v.8). The focus here is not so much on the work of Christ at Calvary, as the effect of that work on the believer's conduct. The One who has 'taken away' (to remove by lifting) our sins is the One in whom 'is (not was) no sin'. This is an absolute statement – there neither was, nor ever could be, any root principle of sin in Him – and thus He both *knew* (Paul) and *did* no sin (Peter). Remember that John has defined sin as 'lawlessness'. Whether coming *in*, moving *through* or going *out* of the world, the will of the Lord Jesus was ever subject to that of His Father (cf. Hebrews 10.9; John 5.30; Luke 22.42). He, then, is the perfect pattern of what the child of God should be (Hiebert). **v.6:** *EW Rogers: If He took away our sins, it follows that there should no longer be a continuance in it. If 'in Him is no sin' it follows that 'whosoever abideth in Him does not practise sin.* John introduces two groups, contrasting their moral *conduct* (v.6) and *character* (vv.7-8). A believer characteristically 'abides' in Christ and thus does not practice sin. To 'abide' is to continually delight *in* and cleave *to* Christ, enjoying ongoing fellowship and communion. Christ is the sphere of such a person's life and thus they walk under His influence. Conversely, the one who practices sin has not 'seen' Him (by faith), neither 'known' Him as to His character. Such an individual has never, either in the past or now (*perfect* tense), had vital contact (relationship) with Christ.

v.7: A tree is known by its fruit (Matthew 7.20). A true believer, one who is righteous by nature, consistently walks righteously (involving *obedience* to the word of God and *love* for one another, vv.23-24). Thus, their life is morally consistent with the nature of His Saviour. As such, the believers were not to be 'deceived' – suggesting this was one of the prevalent deceptions of the false teachers. **v.8:** Conversely, the person that habitually persists in sin is living a life morally consistent with that of the devil who 'sinneth' from the beginning (character) of his becoming the devil (Ezekiel 28.15; Isaiah 14.12-15; John 8.44). These unregenerate are 'of the devil' – they belong to his family and imitate his character. The devil has always sought to misrepresent God. Thus, the Son of God (suggestive of *power*) was manifested to declare God in His fulness and put to silence the *slander* of the devil. But the devil's works comprise more than mere slander. He *originated* and led *rebellion* (lawlessness) against God from the beginning, binding human beings in chains of sin. Christ came to 'destroy' (loose, break up) such works – the *aorist* most naturally referring to the work of Calvary (John 12.31; Hebrews 2.14). *Hay: The work of Christ has destroyed the devil's work in fettering people to a perpetually evil life-style. There are now people in the world who are passionate about righteousness rather than sin.* *EW Rogers: By His death, He laid the basis whereby it will be seen that all the baneful workings of Satan will have been destroyed and everything brought into a state which, in every part, utters the glory of God.*

v.9: John now describes the essential character of those who are 'born of God', not the occasional contradictions that may be seen in practice. A true believer does not practice sin; it is wholly unnatural to one who has the principle of divine life within (communicated by the Spirit of God through the word of God, 1 Peter 1.23; 2 Peter 1.4). This 'seed' (life) 'remains' in the believer and cannot be lost (eternal security). **v.10:** So, family likeness is manifested in a person's character. The 'children of the devil' (cf. Matthew 13.38) do not practice righteousness, neither love those that belong to the family of God. By implication, then, true believers act as God acts (righteousness) and display His nature (love).

The Principle of Love [3.11-18]

What Love is NOT (negative). v.11: The mention of love (v.10) causes John to develop the theme. Again, love is presented as a test of profession (cf. 2.3-17) and contrasts 'lawlessness' (v.4). The *lawless* man is self-centred, seeking only to gratify himself and his own will. The principle of *love* is the very opposite. The following verses will give the clearest example of what love is (vv.16-18) and is not (vv.11-15). That believers should 'love one another' is the original apostolic message which they had heard 'from the beginning', i.e. when they first heard the gospel (2.7). This is a message (truth) which originated with the Lord Jesus and has not changed. *Stott: In both doctrine (1.5) and ethics (3.11) we must go right back to the beginning and enquire what the apostles originally taught.* 'Love one another' is the pre-eminent ethic of Christian life. John emphasises love more than others because he writes against a background of God's people as a family (rather than a body or kingdom). Sacrificial and selfless service for other believers, no matter how much we like or associate with them, should be *habitual* (present tense) and *impartial* (one another). This is the manifestation of the character of Christ. **v.12:** This verse expands and illustrates v.10. Cain was 'of that wicked (*poneros*) one' and thus imitated his character (John 8.44). *Poneros* is evil that **actively opposes** good. Cain 'slew' (to 'slaughter by cutting the throat', implies a violent death) Abel because his 'own works were evil' (*poneros*) betraying the character of his life, and devilish family likeness. It therefore follows that he actively opposed and resented his brother who lived righteously (fruit) because he was righteous (root). *MacArthur: The ungodly resent the righteous because, through their righteous actions, they expose the false beliefs and wicked practices of those who are evil.*

v.13: Believers should stop being 'surprised', then, at the hostility of the world. The world system, originated by Cain, to the exclusion of God (Genesis 4) hates and seeks to persecute all who *oppose* or *expose* its evil principles. The antagonism between evil and righteousness has not ceased. The righteous living of believers is a silent rebuke to the world. **v.14:** True believers, however, **love** (habitual practice) their fellow brethren. This is proof of having 'passed' (migrated) out of the sphere of (spiritual) death into the realm of eternal life (John 5.24). The *perfect* tense suggests a transfer which is complete and permanent. Note. In John's gospel, love for one another is *outward* evidence to the world that we belong to Christ (John 13.35). In John's epistle, it is a conscious, *inward* witness to self. In contrast, the children of the devil (particularly the false teachers) are not characterised by love at all, least of all for their (assumed) brethren, and thus abide in the sphere of spiritual death (Ephesians 2.1). **v.15:** In a statement reminiscent of Matthew 5.21-22, John teaches that persistent hatred of a brother is equivalent to the act of 'murder'. Though the overt *act* may not have been committed, the *motive* is present, for 'murder is in the heart before it is in the hand'. Such a person does not have eternal life. John is not teaching that a murderer *cannot* be saved, but one who is characterised by a persistent hatred of his so-called brethren is not saved. Such a person bears the character of Cain, and therefore the devil. *Hay: The teaching is challenging. Perhaps that bitter, critical, aggressive, abusive assembly member is not a believer at all; maybe, like Cain, he is 'of that wicked one', an infiltrator who knows nothing of the saving grace of God!*

What Love IS (positive). v.16: Believers have come to experience, as a permanent possession, love ('of God' is omitted) – the kind of love that is *divine* in character. Christ 'laid down His life', in a deliberate and voluntary act, for us. *FB Hole: We have to ponder very deeply upon all the virtue, excellence and glory that is compressed into the 'He', and then contemplate the sin, wretchedness and misery that characterised the 'us', if we desire in any adequate way to perceive the love.* In the light of this glorious truth, we have a moral obligation to do the same for our brethren, should we be called to do so (cf. Philippians 2.30; Romans 16.4). John is not seeking to stimulate a spirit of martyrdom but indicating the extent to which Christian love should be willing to go (Hiebert). Calvary demands self-centredness to be abandoned.

v.17: If the *extreme* is true, how much more is there an obligation in the every day. The *greater* of v.16 includes the *lesser* of v.17. If love would go to such a length, then it would also go to any point that falls short of it. Not, perhaps, to lay **down** our lives, but at least to lay **out** our lives for others (1 Corinthians 16.15). The example John uses is a person who has 'this world's good', referring not necessarily to a person who is rich, but one who possesses the material means to meet the need of another. This person 'sees' his brother in need. This is more than a passing glance – it implies careful and lingering consideration – to look as at a spectacle. *Leckie: We may sometimes rise to the occasion when an appeal is made but the thought in this verse is of not waiting for such a request. It is something we are prepared to do the moment we see it for ourselves; it is action upon seeing.* But upon recognising such need, the brother 'slams shut' (and locks) the door of his heart (bowels), deliberately turning away from compassionate feelings or merciful actions towards the one in need. Such an individual does not exhibit the love of God (from Him as a source), neither love for God (as an object, cf. 4.20). Hardheartedness should never characterise believers. **v.18:** The conclusion is simple: actions speak louder than words. It is not enough to offer kind and comforting words when the situation demands sacrificial action (cf. James 2.15-16). 'Words' are produced by the 'tongue', but 'deeds' spring from a person who is living the 'truth' (cf. v.19).