

## “A Purifying Hope” (An Exposition of 1 John 3:1-3)<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

We began to unpack this wonderful and profound passage of Scripture a few weeks ago. At that time we focused our attention upon what the Apostle John tells us here about the greatness of the love of God toward us as believers, especially in the grace of *adoption* in Christ and of *the new birth* by the Holy Spirit.

In v.1 John all but tells us that this great love of God for sinners like us is utterly incomprehensible. It is so lofty that we cannot hope to fully understand it, and are hard-pressed to even *begin* to appreciate it as we should. But the better that we understand and appreciate the reality of these truths of the gospel, the more life-transforming and sanctifying that they become in our lives.

And in many ways that is precisely John's point here in our text, isn't it? John has a very *practical* end in mind in reminding us of the love and grace of God in our adoption in Christ as His children, and in the new birth by His Spirit, and that is that we who believe might *live for God*.

Back in 1 John 2:29 he told us, “**If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.**” You could say that everything that John says in our text is in some ways *a commentary on that verse*, explaining to us in more detail just what it was the he meant by it.

*Why* is it the case that “**everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him**”? Because the new birth by the Holy Spirit has a transformative effect upon us, so that those who are “**born of him**” will begin to show the family likeness or resemblance, being more and more conformed to the image of Christ, until at long last when Christ returns in glory, “**we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is**” (v.2).

We are going to spend the bulk of our time looking at v.3 today. There John tells us, “**And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.**” This is true of everyone who hopes in Christ, of everyone who is a child of God through faith in Christ and has been born again.

### *The Christian Hope*

The first thing we need to make sure that we understand rightly in our text is *the Christian hope*. What exactly is John talking about when he says that “**everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.**” First things first, as we saw a few weeks ago, John is clearly speaking of *our hoping in Christ* as believers. He is not saying that everyone who *has this hope within himself* will purify himself. (That is certainly true enough, but that is not the way John puts it here.)

No, the “**in him**” that John speaks of in v.3 is that of hoping in or *upon Him*, that is, upon Jesus Christ. That is really the first thing that we must get straight about the true Christian hope – that our hope is very much *a Christ-centered hope*. He is the very essence and source of our salvation and every blessing associated with it. All the blessings that we now have or will one day have are in Christ alone!

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

Paul says as much in that great passage in Ephesians chapter one, where he praises God for His grace and says, **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, *who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*”** (Ephesians 1:3). In v.4 when he tells us that God chose us for salvation, he says, **“even as he chose us *in him* before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love.”**

And so the Christian hope is a hope that is first and foremost of a hope that is *in Christ*. All of the blessings of salvation that are ours as believers are ours in Christ alone, whether that be election, redemption, justification, adoption, sanctification, glorification, being in the presence of the Lord forever – we are blessed with *all* of them in Christ!

*Secondly*, the Christian hope is *not* a worldly hope. It is *not* an uncertain hope. It is *not* the kind of hope that disappoints. The Christian hope is *a certain and sure hope*. And that is in many ways because it is a hope that is in Christ. The Apostle Peter puts it this way:

**“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be *born again to a living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”** (1 Peter 1:3–5)

Our hope is a **“living hope”** because our hope is in Christ who has been raised from the dead! That is why our inheritance in Christ is “imperishable” and **“kept”** (or *guarded*) in heaven for us by the power of God, who is also guarding or keeping *us* by that same power!

Thirdly, the hope (or the *aspect* of the Christian hope) that John specifically has in mind here in our text has to do with our *sanctification* and our *being conformed to the image of Christ*. There is a very close connection between verses 2 and 3. There John tells us:

**“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. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”**

The aspect of the Christian hope that John is drawing our attention to and reminding us of in our text is that of what we will be at Christ's return – that **“when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”** (v.2).

Is being conformed to Christ's image – *being perfectly conformed to and made like Him* – part of your hope? Is that part of what you *long for and look forward to* when you think of our Savior's return in glory? Do we think about that much at all?

Some who profess faith in Christ seem only to be concerned with the forgiveness of their sins and the avoiding of the penalty or wages of sin, which is death, condemnation, and hell, but think nothing of holiness, of being conformed to Christ's image in sanctification and glorification, which are as much a part of our salvation by the grace of God in Christ as justification and forgiveness.

Worse yet, some actually even *preach* as if repentance were not necessary unto salvation, and as if holiness and sanctification were somehow optional for the believer! *They preach only half a Savior, and half a Savior saves no one!*

In his classic book, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, English Puritan, Walter Marshall (1628-1680), writes:

“What a strange kind of salvation do they desire, that care not for holiness? They would be saved, and yet be altogether dead in sin, aliens from the life of God, bereft of the image of God, deformed by the image of Satan, his slaves and vassals to their own filthy lusts, utterly unmeet for the enjoyment of God in glory. Such a salvation as that was never purchased by the blood of Christ; and those that seek it *abuse the grace of God* in Christ, and *turn it into lasciviousness*.”<sup>2</sup>

The believer, the one who has been made alive with Christ and born of God, hates his sin and would be freed and saved from it. Our Lord Jesus came to “**save his people from their sins**” (Matthew 1:21), not just from the penalty of our sins.

Do *you* look forward to no longer struggling with temptation and sin? Do you long for the day when you will no longer mar your fellowship with God by your sin? Complete and total freedom from the very power and presence of sin is part of what makes heaven *heaven*. It is an essential part of the Christian hope!

### *A Purifying Hope*

The second thing that we want to briefly look at in our text is that the Christian hope is *a purifying hope* – it is the kind of hope that leads to and results in the believer's *growth in sanctification*. It is *not* a barren, passive hope, but one that spurs us on and motivates us to *strive after holiness*.

In v.3 John tells us,

“**And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.**”

Simple and to the point. And keep in mind that John is *not* stating this in the form of *a command or an imperative*, but as *a statement of fact or an indicative*. There is certainly an *implied exhortation* and encouragement for us as believers to continue to seek to grow in sanctification (which we will touch on shortly), but he is still just stating facts about genuine believers.

The great Puritan expositor, Thomas Manton (1620-1677) notes:

“The main business of the apostle here is to distinguish the children of God from others. All his children resemble their Father in purity and holiness, which was the proposition to be proved.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, this has been *John's main point all along*. His aim has been to demonstrate that the true children of God, who are adopted in Christ and born of God by His Spirit, will necessarily be those who “**practice righteousness**” (2:29).

Those who do not (like the Gnostics and those like them, who professed a dead faith, divorced from the fruit of holiness), show by their continued life of unrepentance that they do not truly know the Lord, and are yet strangers to the grace of God in the gospel.

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<sup>2</sup> p.100

<sup>3</sup> *The Works of Thomas Manton*, Vol.20, p.477

There are many who *profess* faith but do not *possess* faith, and they show that by how they live, by not walking in fellowship with God. We must always be mindful of the words of Hebrews 12:14, which tells us:

**“Strive for peace with everyone, *and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.*”** (Italics added)

Without holiness – that is *sanctification* – *no one* will see the Lord. Holiness of life and growth in it is the distinguishing mark of a believer; it is *the fruit of a true and living faith*. It is a matter of family resemblance for those who have been adopted by and born of God.

Now we must remember that John's purpose here is to *encourage believers* and to *strengthen our assurance*. He is not trying to lead us into morbid introspection, wondering if we have done enough or if we are holy enough.

Do you sincerely make it your aim to walk with the Lord in obedience to His commandments? Have you *repented* of your sin and turned to God by faith in Christ? Then you are to be encouraged here and should be assured that you are truly reconciled to God.

But there is something of an implied imperative or exhortation here as well, isn't there? John's encouragement for those who believe and have been genuinely born again should motivate us to renew our striving after holiness; it should encourage us *to further purify ourselves*.

In his comments on this passage Manton notes that John tells us that there is work to be done on our part as believers. The one who is born of God is said to purify himself, not to sit back passively and do nothing. He writes, “It is God's work to cleanse the heart; but we must not be idle. . . . How can a man who is unclean by nature, purify himself?”<sup>4</sup>

He also notes that this purifying that John speaks of in v.3 is *in the present tense*. The believer is then “always purifying, making it his daily work to clarify and refine his soul, that it may be fit for the vision of God, and the fruition of God.”<sup>5</sup> *Thus the Christian hope is always a purifying hope.*

### ***Strengthening Our Hope***

So if we as believers would grow in holiness and even in the desire after holiness, what are we to do? Surely even the most sanctified saints among us must read a passage like this one and think of themselves that they have made a small amount of progress in purifying themselves. How small or weak is our hope that we crawl after holiness?

Just as the man in Mark 9:24 cried out to the Lord Jesus, “**I believe; help my unbelief!**”; so too we might cry out, “I truly hope in Christ; help my lack of hope!” If the Christian hope is a purifying hope, how can we (for lack of a better term) grow in or strengthen our grasp of that hope?

The first thing is to *consider it and meditate upon* what the Scriptures tell us about it in passages like our sermon text. We should certainly pray too the Lord to strengthen our hope, so that it might bear more fruit in our lives.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.476

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

There *is* a command or imperative in our text, and it is found back at the beginning of verse one. There John tells us to “**see**” or “**behold**” (KJV). And what are we to behold or consider? The greatness of the love of God toward us in Christ – specifically in our adoption as His children!

He says, “**Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God**” (v.1, KJV). The more we dwell upon the greatness of the love of God toward sinners like us that we should have the great privilege of being called the sons or children of God, the more we will grow in our love for God and our desire to be more like Him!

And the more we grow in our grasp of the promise of what we will be when Christ returns in glory, the more *we will not be content to sit back and wait for it* – we will strive more and more to make progress in our conformity to the image of Christ.

So dwell upon the greatness of God's love for you in Christ. Think about it often. Consider the greatness of His love toward you in adopting you as His child in Christ, and of the work of His Spirit in making you born again - born of Him!

Think often of your home in heaven with the Lord forever, and of seeing the Lord Jesus in His glory and being made like Him when you see Him as He is!

These things are utterly foreign to the unbeliever and the worldly person, but they are precious to every believer. May the Lord work in us by His Spirit to make us more heavenly-minded, and more and more fit for heaven.

May we grow in or hope, that we may purify ourselves more and more, to His glory. - Amen