

“The Children of God and the Children of the Devil” (An Exposition of 1 John 3:4-10)¹

Introduction

You have probably heard the old saying, “There are two kinds of people in this world.” You could say that in some ways this is a summary of John's message in our text this morning. John paints a vivid contrast between the children of God and the children of the devil. He brings this point to a head in v.10, where he tells us:

“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, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”

In many ways this runs contrary to the way that many people (even people in the visible church) think. First, John refutes the all-too-commonly held falsehood that *all people are God's children*. It just isn't true. You will search the Scriptures in vain for support for such an idea. Everything that John says in this epistle, and especially what he says here in our text, flatly contradicts that idea.

John tells us that *you are either a child of God or a child of the devil*. There is no in-between, no neutral spiritual ground. Our text invites us to *examine ourselves* and to ask ourselves whose child we are; and here John gives us a test of sorts by which we are to come to the right conclusion as to whether we are a child of God or a child of the devil.

John's language in the original Greek is *exceedingly blunt*, so much so, that even some of our best English translations render parts of it with additional nuance in order to avoid misunderstandings.² While that is all fine and good, we must make sure that we do not allow that nuance to blunt or water down the clear truth that John is presenting us with for our good here.

The Children of God and the Practice of Sin

It is difficult to know how best to outline or divide our text into clear, logical points, so we will try to keep it as simple as possible. The first thing that John would have us to understand rightly is *the relationship of the children of God to the practice of sin*. In v.4-7 John writes:

“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.”

Notice that the first thing that John would have us clearly understand here is *a right view of sin*, especially a right view of *the practice of sin*. He tells us that to live that way – to *practice sin* – is to practice “**lawlessness**,” for (as he adds at the end of v.4), “**sin is lawlessness**.” We might tend to downplay the true nature of sin, but John will have none of it – *sin is rebellion against God*. Seen in that light, how can we possibly imagine that one who *practices sin* is God's child?

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

² The King James Version (KJV) preserves the simplicity and bluntness of John's statements in its rendering.

Now when John speaks of someone '**making a practice of sinning**' (v.4) or who "**keeps on sinning**" (v.6), he is *not* speaking of the absence of *any and all sin* in the life of a believer. He is *not* teaching a kind of *perfectionism*, whereby believers are said to be able to be perfectly sinless in this life.

This should be abundantly clear from what John said earlier in the epistle. Back in 1 John 1:8–10 he laid the foundation of everything that was to follow, when he told us:

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

So genuine believers in Christ, those who are the children of God in Christ by the grace of God, *cannot* rightly say that "**we have no sin**" (v.8), or that *there is no sin in us*. We also *cannot* claim to have not *committed* sin (v.10). If we do that, we both *deceive ourselves* and make *God* a "**liar**" because we deny the clear teaching of His Word!

Now to be sure, if we are in Christ we have been made "**a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.**" (2 Corinthians 5:17) But this does *not* mean that we have reached or can attain sinless perfection in this life. Sin no longer *reigns over us*, but nevertheless sin still *remains in us*.

And so we who believe in Christ for salvation do not *deny* our sin, but humbly *confess our sins* and so receive *forgiveness* of it and *cleansing* from it by our God and heavenly Father, who is "**faithful and just**" to do so (v.9).

Throughout our text John speaks of the commission of sin in the *present tense*, indicating that he has in mind *the ongoing practice or habit of sin*. In v.6 John says, "**No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.**" The King James Version puts it like this: "**Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.**" (Italics added)

John Stott helpfully points out, "it is not the isolated act of sin which is envisaged, but the settled habit of it" ³ And so John's point throughout our text is that the children of God will *not* be such as who continue to live in a settled disposition and habit of rebellion against God.

Not only is such a thing *not fitting* for a believer, but it is in many ways *impossible*, as we will see as go through the rest of our text.

Are *you* a professing believer in Christ? Do you claim to be a child of God? Then the reality of your profession of faith and of your status as a child of God in Christ will be *evidenced by how you live*.

And so if you profess faith in Christ but are still continuing in rebellion against God by the settled habit and lifestyle of sin, you have not yet "**seen him or known him**" (v.6). You still need to repent of your sins and truly turn to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

No doubt there are countless sinners who have deceived themselves into believing that all is well with their souls despite the utter absence of the fruit or evidence of a true and living faith in Christ.

The *flip-side* of that truth is that **“Whoever practices [or does] righteousness is righteous, as he [i.e. Christ] is righteous”** (v.7). The true children of God are evidenced by a pattern of sincere, even if imperfect, obedience to God's commandments. Again, this is a matter of exhibiting the family likeness.

The Children of God and the Work of Christ

Now John also gives us *reasons* for these things, doesn't he? He gives us logical and Scriptural proofs as to why the true *children of God* in Christ are those who do *not* practice sin, but rather practice righteousness; and why (conversely) the *children of the devil* are known by their practice of sin. As always, as the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 7:20, **“by their fruits ye shall know them.”** (KJV)

The *first* reason or proof that John gives us for these things has to do with *the nature of the work of Christ for our salvation*, and the *second* reason or proof has to do with *the work of the Holy Spirit in applying the work of Christ to us for our salvation*.

First, *the work of Christ* and the children of God. If we would just consider rightly the nature of the work of Christ for our salvation, it will become clear to us that we as His redeemed cannot continue on in sin.

The first thing that John mentions about the work of Christ is in v.5, where he tells us:

“You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.”

Different forms of the Greek word for **“appeared”** occurs no less than six (6) times in 1 John 2:29-3:10. Sometimes it is used in reference to Christ's *second* coming. In v.2 John tells us, **“we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”**

But in v.5 John is clearly speaking of the *first coming of Christ* – that He **“appeared”** in the flesh to atone for and **“take away”** our sins by his death on the cross! Now this *taking away* certainly has to do with *the forgiveness of our sins* – our justification. Indeed one of the Greek words for “forgive” has the connotation of *removing or sending something away*, like the *scapegoat* in Leviticus 16:22.

That the Lord Jesus Christ came to lay down His life to take away our sins was clear from the very beginning of His public ministry. When John the Baptist first saw Him, he proclaimed, **“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”** (John 1:29)

Taking away our sins is why He came; laying down His life as **“the Lamb of God”** to atone for our sins was the way that He accomplished the taking away of our sins.

But clearly John is saying that the taking away of our sins involved *much more* than just the taking away of *the guilt* of our sins. Jesus came *not* just to take away the *guilt* of our sins (as important as that is), but to take away *our sins*! He came to rescue us from the power of the devil and from our slavery to sin's power over us!

That is why John says that **“no one who keeps in sinning has either seen him or known him.”** (v.6) And then he adds, **“Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.”** (v.7) Practicing righteousness is evidence of a true saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

And then in v.8 John gives us *another* reason or proof for these things that is based upon the nature of the finished work of Christ for our salvation. There he tells us:

“Whoever 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.*”

Not only did Christ come 'in order to take away our sins' (v.5), but He also came to **“destroy the works of the devil.”** And those two things are *not unrelated*. This reminds me of the first question of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which says:

“Q.1. What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. *He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.* He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.” (Italics added)

That is why John can say that **“Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil”** (v.8), because Christ came to set His people free from the tyranny of the devil, and to destroy his works, which are chiefly those of sin and misery, death and destruction.

The Children of God and the Work of the Holy Spirit

Last but not least, John also gives us a *second* reason or proof for the necessity of the children of God walking in righteousness rather than in sin, and it has to do with *the work of the Holy Spirit in applying the work of Christ to us for our salvation*. In v.9-10 he writes:

“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. 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, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”

If you are a believer in Christ, you have been **“born of God”** (v.9) by the work of the Holy Spirit, and this new birth and its effects are not temporary in nature. John adds that the reason why those who are born of God do not make a practice of sinning is that **“God’s seed abides in him.”**

What that **“seed”** is has been the subject of some disagreement among commentators, but the main point is clear – the work of the Holy Spirit in believers, in making us a new creation in Christ, is *not* a passing, temporary thing. The Holy Spirit indwells and abides with God’s children in Christ.

Indeed, the Scripture speaks of the indwelling Holy Spirit as the guarantee or deposit of the rest of our inheritance in Christ. In Ephesians 1:13–14 the Apostle Paul tells us:

“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” (Italics added)

The abiding work of the Holy Spirit within us as believers is such that we **“cannot keep on sinning”** precisely *because* we have been **“born of God”** (v.9). Indeed, part of the work of the Holy Spirit that was promised and prophesied regarding the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:33 was that God would *write His law on our hearts* so that we would follow Him:

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.* And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Italics added)

This is why John can say (as he does in v.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, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”

We demonstrate or prove whose children we are – either children of God or children of the devil – *by how we live*.

If you are a *child of God* by the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit applying Christ's work of redemption to you, then it will be evident in your practicing of righteousness, seeking to obey your heavenly Father's commandments sincerely, even if not perfectly.

But if you do *not* practice righteousness and do *not* love the brethren, then, despite any profession of faith you may have made, you are *not yet* a child of God, but are still one of the **“children of the devil.”**

If that describes you and you know it, if God is convicting you even now of your sin and unbelief, repent of your sin and turn to God through faith in Christ, and you will be saved. The one who comes to God through Him He will never cast out.

And if you *are* a believer, and know yourself to be a child of God through faith in Christ, make it your aim to be more and more conformed to the image of Christ, purifying yourself even as He is pure (v.3).

And be encouraged that God *will* work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13), because Christ came to take away our sins and to destroy the works of the devil; and because you have been born of God, and His seed abides in you for that very purpose! - Amen