

“EVERYONE WHO HOPES IN HIM PURIFIES HIMSELF”

Thus far in our study of this letter, we have seen John set forth his three tests of true Christianity: the test of obedience, the test of love, and the test of sound doctrine. And now, as we move into the next major section of the letter, we will see John revisit these themes and elaborate upon them. In our text this morning, John returns to the test of obedience and expands upon what he has already said on this matter. And John will continue to deal with the theme of Christian obedience up through 3:10. In the section stretching from 2:28 to 3:10, John's purpose is to show us that Christians are not only known by their beliefs, but also by their righteous conduct. In the passage we are studying today, 2:28-3:3, John talks about how the Christian's hope in Christ's *future* appearing leads to the practice of righteousness. In next week's passage, 3:4-10, he talks about why Christ's *past* appearing leads to the practice of righteousness. We can sum up the message of our passage this morning as follows: *those who have truly been born of God have a future hope that motivates them to pursue holiness.*

Our text begins with John repeating a phrase that he used several times in the preceding passage: “abide in him (Christ).” Notice that this is stated as a command. Abiding in Christ is not a given. It is something that every Christian needs to do. We need to take action if we want to abide in Christ. We need to make sure that our relationship with Jesus Christ remains alive and see to it that it bears fruit. If we fail to do this, our love for Christ will grow cold, and we will either fall into a purely external practice of the faith or we will lose interest in spiritual things altogether. But if we

endeavor to abide in Christ, our lives will be increasingly characterized by a desire to live in a manner that is pleasing to God.

Before explaining this further, John gives one of the reasons why we need to be so careful to make sure that we are abiding in Christ. A day is coming, John tells us, when Christ will appear again. And on that day, every one of us will have to appear before Christ to give an account of how we have lived our lives. Jesus himself explained this very poignantly in his parable of the talents. He said that when he returns, he will be like a master who returns from a journey and wants to know how his servants have managed the property that he entrusted to their care while he was away. On that day, Jesus will want to see that we have done something productive with what he placed in our care. The gifts of grace that we receive when we place our faith in Christ are gifts that produce fruit, the fruit of a transformed life. But if, when we stand before Christ on the day of his appearing, we have no fruit to show for our faith, it will prove that our faith was false. This is why the expectation of Christ's second coming should motivate us to practice righteousness. You do not want to hang your head in shame when you stand before the holy gaze of the Lord Christ on that day.

This brings us to verse 29, where John reiterates the test of obedience by saying: "If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him." John is saying that one of the most surefire ways for us to test the genuineness of our faith is to ask ourselves if we are people who practice righteousness. Now why do you suppose this is the case? Why is the test of obedience

such an effective measurement of a person's true spiritual condition? It is for the simple reason that righteous living runs so contrary to our fallen human nature. The practice of righteousness is not natural to us. Our natural inclination is to do whatever seems best in our own eyes, not what the Lord instructs us to do in his Word. The only explanation for a person who practices righteousness is that this person has been given a new nature. Or, to use John's way of putting it, such a person has been born of God. A Christian is someone who has been spiritually begotten after Christ's likeness. God's life, spiritual life, has been imparted to him. And God's life always brings about a transformation in the lives of those in whom it is present.

The Christian lives a new life because God has given him a new nature. Because this new nature comes from a righteous God, it pursues righteousness. The ambition of a regenerate heart is to have our will utterly conformed to the will of God. God's law is not a burden to those who have been born again. They have been made to see that God's law is good. The person who is not interested in living a righteous life should not have any confidence that he belongs to Jesus Christ. True Christians want to be holy because they see the beauty of holiness. The Puritan Walter Marshall once expressed it this way:

“They that are offended at the uncomfortableness of a religious life, never yet knew the true way of religion; else they would find, that ‘the ways of wisdom are the ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace’ (Prov. 3:17).” [*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 109]

We always need to be on guard against the temptation to trust in Christ for what Marshall called an “imaginary salvation,” a salvation in which we look to Christ to forgive us of our sins but not to give us the power to live a holy life. It is a sad fact that many people seem to think of the Christian gospel along those lines. But we need to remember that the true gospel message is that faith in Christ sets us free from both the penalty and the power of sin. It sets us free from slavery to sin so that we might be slaves of God.

This brings us to the beginning of chapter 3, where John asks us to stop and think about the immeasurable blessing that it is to be called children of God. John wants us to consider the lavish nature of God's love to us in Christ. Not only has God provided for the forgiveness of our sins, but he has also adopted us into his family. He has given us an inheritance in his eternal kingdom. Jesus even tells us, in the book of Revelation, that we will sit with him on his throne. We are co-heirs with Christ. The grace that God extends to us in Christ truly is an extravagant grace.

The reason why John calls our attention to this at this point in his letter is because he knows that we need to have a proper appreciation of the magnitude of God's love for us if we are going to have the right motivation for living a holy life. The Christian pursues holiness, not because he is trying to gain God's acceptance by his performance, but because he is so grateful that God has accepted him on the basis of Christ's performance. The proper motivation for Christian obedience is gratitude.

John also tells us that our adoption as God's children means that our relationship to the world has changed. We are no longer of the world. We belong to another world, to the kingdom of God. The world does not know us, because it did not know Christ when he walked on this earth. This reminds us that one of the things that should mark us out as Christians is how different we are from the people of this world.

That being said, John is also aware that we are not yet all that we will one day be in Christ. There is an eschatological tension in the life of every Christian. We can see this tension in verse two by looking at how John speaks of Christians in terms of the "now" and the "not yet." There is a "now" and a "not yet" for everyone who truly belongs to Christ. In terms of the "now," we already have a new nature. We are God's children now. We have been justified; we have been regenerated; we have been adopted into God's family. These realities are true from the moment a person places his or her trust in Jesus Christ. They are present realities.

On the other hand, there is also a sense in which our new nature is hidden from our view. The new nature is there, but right alongside of it is our old nature. And these two natures do not get along with each other. They are at war with one another. We are "not yet" what the Lord intends us to be. And this "not yet" aspect of our salvation will remain true until the day when Christ appears, the day of his return. But when he does return, we will be made like him. On that great day our old nature will be done away with once and for all and our new nature in Christ will be perfected. At present, our identity as the children of God is hidden in a manner that is analogous to how Christ's

divine nature was hidden during his days on earth. The world does not believe that we are God's children. There may even be times when we ourselves have doubts about our identity as God's children. But when Jesus returns, we will be revealed as children of God in a manner that is analogous to Christ's glorious appearing. On that great day, there will be no doubt in anyone's mind that Jesus Christ really is the Lord. And in the same way, there will be no doubt that we really are the children of God. Our transformation will be complete. We will be made perfect. This is the biblical doctrine of glorification, the doctrine that says that at Christ's second coming believers will be raised up in glory to appear blameless before God and be "made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity." [WSC 38]

One other thing that John tells us about that day is that we will see Christ as he is. Our faith will become sight. At present, our mortal and corruptible nature functions like a veil, keeping the majesty of God hidden from our view. But when Christ appears on the day appointed for his return, the veil will be lifted, and we will see him for who he truly is, not by faith but by sight.

It is important for us to understand that this is what will make heaven heaven. It is the blessing of being in the glorious presence of the Lord Jesus that will make heaven heaven. Most people think that they would want to go to heaven, but for many, the heaven that they imagine is not the heaven of the Bible. Think of it this way. Imagine heaven as a place where all of your loved ones were present, a place where all of the pleasures and joys of this life could be enjoyed endlessly, a place where there was no

sadness at all, a world of perfect bliss. But then imagine this: though this imaginary heaven has all of these things, the one thing that it lacks is the presence of Jesus Christ. You have your friends, your favorite hobbies, endless wealth, good food, perfect health, beautiful weather, but no Christ. Of course, such a heaven could never truly exist, but by imagining it we come up with a helpful diagnostic question. Could you be happy in such a heaven? Your answer to that question will tell you something about your spiritual condition. If a heaven without Christ would be heaven for you, then you are not ready for the true heaven.

You see, the biblical picture of heaven is not like this imaginary heaven that I have just described. In John's vision of heaven in Revelation 4 and 5, the throne of God and of the Lamb is at the very center of everything. Every eye is fixed upon the Lord. Christ is at the center of heaven. Therefore, if Christ is not the object of your deepest desires and longings, you would not be happy in heaven. John Owen puts it this way: "Heaven, or eternal blessedness, is nothing but full enjoyment of those spiritual things which we now enjoy here on earth by faith." [*Spiritual-Mindedness*, 233] If you do not love Christ in this life with eyes of faith, you will not love him on the day when he appears in all his glory.

The fact that we are not yet what we will one day be in Christ is a reality that often frustrates us. We can easily grow discouraged as we struggle against the old nature that still resides within us. But our future hope of glory, a hope that is based upon our present faith, fights against this discouragement and drives us to live more and more upright

lives. John puts it this way: “everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.” It is your calling as a Christian to purify yourself. Cast aside all else if you have to, but do not neglect this one thing: purify yourself. I like how this is expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism, where it says that God’s commandment that we have no other gods before him requires “that I give up anything rather than go against his will in any way.” [Q. 94] The Christian should be willing to give up anything rather than go against the will of his heavenly Father. We should not permit anything to get in the way of our practice of righteousness. If there is anything in your life right now that is standing in the way of your call to live a holy life, get rid of it. It is that simple. Do not think that you can offer the Lord a halfhearted attempt at living a Christian life. That is not the way a child of God should think. No, the child of God strives to purify himself as his Savior is pure. The child of God is a person who goes through life with these words ever on his lips:

Thou didst give thyself for me,

Now I give myself to thee.