

“By This We Know”

The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

Texts: 1 John 3:11-24; Genesis 4:1-16

In the first two chapters of his first epistle, the Apostle John sets out the contrast between those born of God and those who embrace the phantom Jesus of the proto-Gnostics. John says that this contrast is as clear as the difference between light and darkness. Indeed, those who believe that Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh will walk in the light of that one who is the light of the world. But those who deny that Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh instead prefer to live in darkness. And so in the next section of this letter (chapter three), John continues to develop this theme when he tells us that the contrast between believers and the proto-Gnostics can be readily seen in the lives of those who are children of God. The way in which someone demonstrates that they are a child of God is very simple. Those who have been brought from death to life by Christ will strive to obey God’s commandments, while those who embrace the gnostic heresy are not at all interested in obeying the commandments. This is because such people have deceived themselves into thinking that they have somehow gained enough knowledge and insight into the mysteries of Christ that they no longer sin. And since they think they have risen above their own sinfulness, their conduct inevitably reflects their indifference to the commandments of God. Those who abide in death (as John puts it) love darkness, hate Christ, and are indifferent to righteousness.

As we continue our series on the Epistles of John, we are making our way through chapter three of 1 John, where John is discussing the contrast between those who are children of God and those deny that Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh (whom John describes as children of the devil). As we saw last time, in this chapter John repeats a number of themes he’s already addressed in the earlier chapters. John does this to emphasize to his reader the importance of realizing that all those who believe that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh *will* walk in the light that Jesus came to reveal.

As we have seen, as John develops this contrast he sets forth a cause and effect relationship, which can be expressed by the indicative and imperative moods (or as is often expressed in terms of the contrast between law and gospel). Those who are born again (the cause) will strive to obey God’s commandments (the effect). John’s opponents not only deny this cause and effect relationship, but they also deny that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh because of their view that matter is evil. They also see no need to reign in their sinful impulses because they think they have been able to purify their own souls through the religious secrets they have learned. To put it bluntly, they are about as wrong as one can be, hence John’s labeling their teaching as the “spirit of antichrist.”

Unfortunately, it is common in many evangelical circles to read this section of John’s epistle as though John is discussing sanctification and the Christian life, and to identify the issue that John is addressing as the question of whether or not Christians may advance to such a point in the Christian life that they are actual able to cease from sinning—so called “Christian perfectionism.” The most famous and influential of those advocating perfectionism is John Wesley, who, in *His Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777),¹ discusses his view on this in the form of a series of questions and answers:

¹ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, (London: The Epworth Press, 1976), 42.

Q. What is Christian Perfection?

A. The loving God with all our hearts, mind, soul, and strength. This implies that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions are governed by pure love.

Q. Do you affirm that this perfection excludes all infirmities, ignorance, and mistake?

A. I continually affirm the quite the contrary, and always have done so.

Q. But how can every thought, word, and work be governed by pure love, and still liable to ignorance and mistake?

A. I see no contradiction here; “A man may be filled with pure love, and still liable to mistake.”

As you may know, Wesley was converted in 1738 at a meeting of the Moravian Brethren at Aldersgate in London while hearing read aloud the forward to Martin Luther’s Commentary on Romans. It is too bad that Wesley didn’t go on and actually read Luther’s commentary! In his defense of his doctrine of perfectionism, Wesley repeatedly cites from this section of 1 John, ensuring that these verses became very much a part of Wesley’s theology. To this day, Wesley’s stress upon moving beyond the first stage of Christian experience to a higher level of victory over sin still influences our discussion of these verses.

The Apostle John is setting out a contrast between those who believe that Jesus was the word manifest in the flesh and those who do not. His focus is not upon distinguishing defeated from victorious Christians. Ironically, the Apostle is actually writing to refute those who were arguing that Christians could rise above sin—hence the powerful words in verses 6-10 of chapter one. *“If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 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.”*

While Wesley left us an out—we can be “perfect” (and not sin), but we still make mistakes and act out of ignorance—John seems to be speaking to an entirely different matter. According to the Apostle, it is futile to hide our sins and then pretend (as the Gnostics were doing) that it was possible for people to actually stop sinning. The opening words of chapter two must ring in our ears. *“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”* John is not an antinomian—Christians must strive to obey God’s commandments. But neither does John teach Christian Perfectionism, nor is he even addressing the matter Wesley sees in the passage. John is simply telling us that Christians will strive to obey God’s commandments and that the proto-Gnostics are not interested doing so, seeing no need to be obedient, having deceived themselves into believing that gnostic enlightenment has enabled them to rise above their sins.

So, when John writes in verse 6 of chapter 3, *“No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him”* and again 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,”* John is not speaking of two stages (or levels) of Christian experience—those who live in

defeat, and those who realize their victory in Christ and live a life of perfect love. Rather, John is contrasting those who are born of God—who demonstrate that they are born of God by striving to obey, and those who have been taken in by the spirit of antichrist and who prefer to live in darkness. Such people keep on sinning (as their characteristic) and “practicing sin” with apparent indifference. That is the point of John’s contrast. This is why as we work our way through the balance of this section, it is vital that we keep in mind the difference between the indicative mood (God’s children will bear fruit), and the imperative mood (“Bear fruit to prove you are God’s children”). Is John describing the differences between believers and these proto-Gnostics, or is John commanding us to rise above sin? Are John’s statements indicatives, or is he giving us imperatives?

So it is with this distinction between the indicative and the imperative clearly in mind that we now turn to our text, verses 11-24 of chapter three.

In the first two chapters, John already stressed the importance of obeying God’s commandments, a theme to which he now returns. Again, John focuses upon the importance of love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. As we’ve seen, Jesus Christ is not only God manifest in the flesh, he is also love incarnate. If we want to know what the law means when it commands us to love God and neighbor, we look to the life of Jesus as recorded in the gospels. And because we are to abide in Christ and in his word, we too will strive to love God and our neighbor—specifically, in this case, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In fact, as John reminds us in verse 11, *“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”* Since it was a characteristic of these proto-Gnostic groups plaguing the church in Asia Minor (especially in and around Ephesus) to claim to have knowledge of secret things revealed only to them, John counters this by reminding his reader that what he is teaching is the same message that the apostles have taught from the very beginning. Granted, it is not nearly as exciting as “secret knowledge” into the mysteries of the universe, but the commandment to love one another was given by none other than our Lord himself. In John 13:34, Jesus states, *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”* While, on the one hand, such a commandment is impossible to obey and can only be fulfilled by those who are covered by Christ’s imputed righteousness, nevertheless, this is what Christians are to do—love each other—*because* Christ’s perfect love of neighbor is imputed to them through faith. The commandments of God do not change. So, there is no need for any of John’s readers to even listen to those who claim to have “new” or “secret” teaching. The Gnostics claim to be in the “know,” but actually know nothing.

Much like Paul does in his epistles, John now uses an example from redemptive history to illustrate his point. As we saw in our Old Testament lesson, Cain brought an offering to God which was not acceptable—Cain’s offering (of produce) was probably a thanksgiving offering like that Adam would have offered to the Lord before the Fall. But after the fall of the human race into sin, God requires a sin offering—hence Abel’s offering consisting of one of the firstborn animals from his herds. Angry that his offering was not accepted, Cain killed his brother, causing God’s curse to come upon the anguished Cain.

When John recounts the story of Cain and Abel, he does so as an illustration of those whose deeds are righteous (Abel) coming under persecution from those whose deeds are evil. Says John, *“We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.”* Ultimately, John attributes this to the work of Satan—who was desperately trying to assassinate the messianic seed before the Messiah would come and crush his head. Given his hatred and jealousy of his brother, Cain is the perfect illustration of the

world²—hence John’s use of the story of Cain as illustrative of the world which denies that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. “*Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.*” John’s point is that just as Cain (whose deeds were evil, because he did not believe the promise and was not justified) hated Abel and killed him, so too the world (as it lies under the control of the evil one) will hate all those who confess that Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh. Not only have many antichrists already come—and antichrist is anyone who denies that Jesus is God in the flesh—but Christians should not be surprised that non-Christians will hate them. If we walk in the light of God’s word, the world will hate us because light exposes not only the sins of those who wish to keep them hidden, but light also exposes the errors of the Gnostic teachers plaguing the church. Light brings everything out into the open.

If you know the gospel of John, you know that Jesus himself told his disciples precisely the same thing in John 15:18. “*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.*” To identify with Christ is to be willing to endure the scorn of the world. Therefore, there will always be the temptation for a Christian to turn their back upon the incarnate word (Jesus) because the scorn of the world can be very great. This echoes John’s earlier warning back in verses 15-17 of chapter two. “*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*”

In verse 14, John continues to make his contrast. The world “practices” its sin by hating Christ and his people. Christians, on the other hand, will be characterized by their love for Christ and his people. “*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.*” Notice that once again John speaks of what Christians “know” in contrast to what the proto-Gnostics think they know. One of the sure signs that someone has passed from death to life (i.e., is now regenerate, “born again,”) is that they love those who have likewise been brought from death to life. Wesley jumps to the wrong conclusion when he takes John to mean that Christians will be able to love their brothers and sisters with a pure love. John is not addressing the question of whether or not we will love the brethren perfectly, but he is making the point we *will* love our brothers and sisters, in contrast to the world, which hates us.

This is because “*whoever does not love abides in death.*” For John, light, life, and love are necessarily connected. Those who have been given life (through the gospel) will walk in the light (not in darkness). Therefore, John can state that those who have life will love their brothers and sisters. The flip side is that death, darkness, and hatred are likewise connected. Those who practice hatred (i.e., who do not abide in love) do so because they are dead in sin. Those enslaved to their sinful nature, practice what they are. They love darkness *because* they are dead in sin. They hate God’s people *because* they are dead in sin. Such people abide in death. They hate Christ, his people, and the light which comes from his word.

Having introduced Cain as an example, John alludes to him again in verse 15. “*Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.*” Those who do not have love are dead in sin. Inevitably, they manifest what they are, murderers, like Cain—remember the words of Jesus to this effect in John 8:44: “*You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*” Now, it should be clear that John is not stating that should someone take a life they

² Stott, The Epistles of John, 144.

cannot repent and be forgiven. But John is pointing out that the characteristic of those whom he has called “children of the devil” is to hate God’s people and therefore they commit murder (in their hearts, if not with their hands). The fact that such people hate and murder their neighbor without any hint of repentance is just another manifestation of the fact that eternal life does not “abide” in them.

Contrast that attitude with those whom Christ has made alive through the gospel. “*By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.*” Remarkably, John points us back to the cross here in verse 16. In 1 John 2:1-2, He’s already told us that Jesus gave himself up as a propitiation for our sins, turning aside God’s wrath and anger toward us. In 3:5, John has told us “*you know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.*” Again we are directed to Jesus, who laid down his life for us when he died for all of our sins and turned aside God’s anger toward us. Because Christ has done that (indicative), so too we should be willing to lay down our lives (our most precious possession) for our fellow believers. Love is the evidence of new life, and love is, in essence, self-sacrifice—the very essence of what Jesus did for us on the cross.³ His self-sacrifice stands in sharp contrast to hate, darkness and death—the characteristic of those in whom eternal life does not abide.

As we have seen throughout this epistle, John sees a direct connection between what we believe about Jesus—that he is the word manifest in the flesh who has died for our sins—and our conduct. John emphasizes this connection again in verse 17. “*But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?*” Jesus laid down his life for us. We should be willing (in light of his sacrifice) to give of our own to those in need. God’s love for us stirs our hearts to love others. Notice that the gospel does this—the emphasis upon God’s love—not the law. Were John to tell us “help those in need, or else God won’t love you,” we’d hate our brother in need. But in light of God’s love for us (who do not deserve it) our own sinful hearts are stirred to love others. Therefore, in verse 18, John can put it this way. “*Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*” The knowledge of God’s love for us should motivate us to act on our neighbor’s behalf. And this love takes the form of concrete action, not mere talk.

In light of John’s emphasis upon walking in the light as demonstrated by our striving to obey God’s commandments, it is fitting that John now turns to the subject of the assurance of salvation. John fully understands that our sinful hearts will balk at the need to strive to obey the commandments. We are prone to self-condemnation which breeds fear and spiritual paralysis. John has been clear that obedience to God’s commandments and love for our brethren will characterize a Christian. But what about those times we don’t obey the commandments as we ought? What about those times we don’t love our brothers and sisters as we should? John will now address this very important point.

In verses 19-20, John reminds us that God’s grace (and reassurance) is greater than our troubled hearts. Says John, “*By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.*” The very fact that John raises this question tells us that only Christians even worry about such things. Someone who is dead in sin, who walks in darkness, who is characterized by a heart filled with hatred toward God and his people, will never once be troubled in heart like John describes here. Only someone who has been brought from death to life has ever had this inner conversation which John describes as self-condemnation (our hearts), which amounts to a lack of assurance of God’s favor toward us.

³ Stott, The Epistles of John, 146.

According to John, when Christians understand the truth of God's word they will see the need to love their brothers and sisters, as well as obey God's commandments. Indeed, the preaching of the gospel (the truth) will create within us the desire to do this—as our catechism wisely reminds us, out of a sense of gratitude because of what God has done for us. Furthermore, the desire to obey and the beginning of obedience will reveal to us that we are Christ's. Says John, from this we can “know” that we are of the truth, and be assured of God's favor toward us. It is the desire to obey God's law which proves that we are Christ's. It is not, as Wesley argued, the degree of obedience which proves that we are Christ's.

Therefore, whenever our hearts condemn us (which I take to mean, whenever we don't live up to what God requires of us, which is inevitable), John reminds us that God, who knows everything, is still greater than our self-condemning hearts. While John doesn't say so directly, it is certainly not a stretch to repeat of what the apostle has said in the opening verses of chapter 2. *“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”* Indeed, upon being reminded that Jesus has already turned aside God's wrath toward us, and upon being reminded that Jesus is presently in heaven interceding for us—good news in light of the fact that God knows everything about us, and yet Jesus (his son) can still save us—we are reminded that God's grace is greater than our hearts (or any self-condemnation we feel when confronted by our sins). At the end of the day, John says, God's grace is far greater than our sinful hearts. The gospel has the last word, not the self condemnation which comes from our own hearts!

Such confidence in God's grace is the ground for our continued efforts to strive to walk in the light and live out that contrast between Christians and the children of darkness. Therefore John can state in verses 21-22, *“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”* God's love for us casts out the fear which keeps us from approaching him, so as to seek that grace we need to walk in the light. Here we see the principle set forth that the gospel (the indicative) gives us confidence and drives out fear and self-condemnation which prevent us from living in confidence, and from living in the comfort of knowing that our pitiful attempts at obedience actually please our heavenly Father.

John now makes this point explicitly in verses 23 and 24. *“And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.”* For John, faith in Christ (“believing in Jesus”) is the basis for our love of others. Even better, those who believe in Jesus are indwelt by the Holy Spirit who ensures that Christ abides in us (“so that we know”), and who also confirms to us that we are Christ's as we strive to obey his commandments. It is interesting therefore, that when John gives us an imperative—“this is his command”—that imperative is to believe in Jesus, so that we might love one another! Again, in this we see that faith in Jesus will manifest itself in good works. The cause (the gospel) leads to the effect (good works and assurance). It is a shame, that Wesley missed this so badly.

What can we take with us in terms of application?

It is in a passage like this that we see how important it is to distinguish the indicative (the gospel) from the imperative (the law). It is through keeping this distinction clear that we know that we are Christ's. As John has set out throughout this section, God gives us life through the gospel. And once we are born again, we will believe in Jesus and abide in his word. Those who have been born again—those for whom Christ has died, for whom he intercedes, and in whom his Spirit dwells

(indicative)—will strive to obey his commandments (the imperatives). This is what distinguishes Christians from those who have been taken in by false teachers who worship a phantom Jesus.

For a Christian, while sin is inevitable, the practice of sin is not our characteristic, and our sin conflicts with God's work within us. This is why once we become Christians our sin often troubles our hearts. And when that happens, John directs us not to the law (how you are doing in terms of obeying the commandments), nor does John urge us to move to a higher level of Christian experience (as did Wesley). No, John directs us back to the gospel, where we are told, God is greater than our troubled hearts. Self-condemnation does not have the final word. The gospel does. Yet, that said, we will all struggle with sin, even as we strive to obey the commandments. It is not through victory over sin that we know we are Christ's. Rather, it is through the desire to obey and the condemnation of our hearts (the grief we feel when we sin) when we don't, that we know we are Christ's. By this we know . . .