

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A look at 1 John: 1 John 3:1-24

The word of God is always up to date and 1 John is no exception. Today the Person of Christ is constantly under attack. In John's day it was the same. John wrote his epistle to affirm that Christ was truly God and that He became a man. In doing so, John was combating three false teachings about Christ which had arisen. These were:

- The denial that Christ was God, asserting He was created (Ebionites)
- The denial that Christ became a man, asserting He was a phantom and He had not come in the flesh (Docetists)
- The denial that Christ was divine and a man prior to His baptism (Cerinthians).

John also wrote his letter to outline the distinguishing features of the children of God which he links to the character of God. God is light (1 John 1:5) and the children of God are to walk in righteousness not sin (1 John 2:1). God is love and children of God have a fellowship which is demonstrated by love towards one another (1 John 2:7-11). God is life and the children of God have a living witness and cannot have anything to do with idolatry (1 John 5:21).

This morning our subject is 1 John 3 and I will start with 1 John 3:1: *"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him."*

John begins by catching our attention. The word "Behold" is a plural word and speaks to all believers. John is filled with the wonder at the love of God the Father. Remember John was an old man, yet he had not lost the sense of the glory of the Father's love. It is his gospel, more than any other, which presents God as the Father. How do we feel about this love? Does it still stir in us wonder and worship as it did in the old Apostle? It is the Father's love which has made us His children. He has brought us into His family. John reserves the word "Son" for Jesus Christ, and calls us children, unlike the Apostle Paul who uses both sons and children when writing about believers.

John brings home to our hearts a love which has taken us out of all the distance and darkness caused by sin and brought us into the life and light of the family of God. As a result, the world does not understand the true Christian, just as it did not know Christ (1 John 3:1). The character and teaching of Christ stand in total contrast to the world's philosophy and culture. The world's hopes are material and earth bound whilst the Christian's hope is spiritual and heavenly. This is emphasised in the next verse, *"Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is"*, 1 John 3:2.

In 1 John 3:2 John teaches us about the present and the future. *"Now we are the children of God"* refers to the present. We do not have to wait to become children; it happens when we have faith in Christ. But this is contrasted with the future *"it has not yet been revealed what we shall be."* John looks forward to the day when Christ will be revealed. This refers to Christ's coming again. *"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also"*, John 14:3.

John uses a characteristic phrase "We know..." He writes with absolute certainty about Christ's return and how His people will be changed into His likeness. At the moment, we are rather like humble caterpillars waiting to be transformed into beautiful butterflies. This change is described in 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. At the present time, we are going through the spiritual and moral process of becoming like Christ. *"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord"*, (2 Corinthians 3:18). At the coming of Christ we shall be changed instantaneously. This hope should have an impact on our lives.

"And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure", 1 John 3:3. Our hope is in Christ and we are to look for it. *"Looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ"* Titus 2:13. This hope should have a purifying effect in our lives now. In 2 Peter 3:11-12, thinking of the eternal state, Peter writes, *"...what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God..."*

If we really expect Christ to come for us, we will live more holy lives. If you come to my house when we are expecting guests to stay, you will see me and my wife, June, acting in different ways. I will be reading or doing some job not at all concerned about the imminent arrival of our friends! Whereas June will be busying herself making sure the house is just right and looking out of the window to see if our friends are about to arrive. It occurs to me that Christians fall into two similar categories - those upon whom Christ's return has little effect and those whose lives become more holy and effective witnesses as they await Christ's return.

It is interesting that, having raised the question of purity, John moves on to the question of sin and lawlessness. In 1 John 3:4 he writes, *"Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness."*

We live in an increasingly impure world. Nothing is left to the imagination. Bad taste, language and behaviour are widespread and purity of life is often belittled. In 1 John 3:4, John deals with the habitual practice of sin, not the isolated act. We all sin but this is different to deliberately engaging in it. Lawlessness is a constant disregard of the law of God and is evidence of not being born of God. Righteousness is an evidence of new birth. The Gnostics of John's day claimed a higher knowledge and used this as an excuse for sinful behaviour. John reaffirms what is essential to the Christian faith in 1 John 3:5, *"And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin."*

John, of course, knew Christ on earth, had seen Him on the cross (John 19:25-27), witnessed the resurrection (John 20:9) and watched Him return to heaven (Acts 1:9-14). John was not putting forward a theory, but presenting clear facts which other Christians had believed. Central to this was Christ's death for our sins. Peter writes in a similar vein, *"Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness - by whose stripes you were healed"*, 1 Peter 2:24. Jesus could only do this because He was sinless: He did no sin (1 Peter 2:22) He knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21) and in Him is no sin (1 John 3:5).

John emphasises that sin is incompatible with the being a child of God. In 1 John 3:6 he writes, *"Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him."* Abiding is a word John uses here and in John 15:4-11 where Jesus encourages His disciples to abide in Him because without Him we can do nothing (see John 15:5). Abiding is the habit of communion with God. Living close to God keeps us from continuing in sin. Believers do sin but it is not a ruling principle of their lives. John explains that those who are not in Christ are still under the control of sin. They have not seen, by faith, Christ as Saviour and experienced the consciousness of His presence with them.

In 1 John 3:7, John has the whole family of God in view in the term, "little children." *"Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practises righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous."* "Little children", is a term of affection. John did not want those whom God loved to be deceived by false teaching. New life in Christ is marked by righteousness. Not self-righteousness but selfless lives of service for Christ producing the fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23).

John then goes to the source of the problem of sin in 1 John 3:8. *"He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil."* John explains the connection between the devil and sin. The Bible teaches from its outset that the devil caused the fall of man by bringing sin into the world which God had created (see Genesis 3:1-7). But just as the devil destroyed the relationship between man and God, so the Son of God destroyed the works of the devil (1 John 3: 8) by bringing in salvation, thus enabling fellowship with God. It is a salvation which deals with the penalty of sin (the past), the power of sin (the present) and ultimately, through Christ's coming, the presence of sin (the future).

"Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God", 1 John 3:9. The Christian by new birth becomes and remains a child of God. We have a new life which cannot be touched by sin even though sin is with us until Christ returns. John uses this verse to explain that the true Christian, who is eternally related to Christ, does not continue in sin as a practice. He then, in 1 John 3:10, contrasts the child of God with the children of the devil. *"In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practise righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother."*

God is love and the proof of being born anew is to love God and His people. 1 John 3:11, *"For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another."* This message was from Christ Himself and John records it in John 15:12, *"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

Loving one another is one of the first things the believer understands and acts upon. Jerome records that the Apostle John when he was too old to preach continued to exhort, "Little children, love one another", and remarked, "It is the Lord's command, and if it is done, it is enough". It is the outcome of Christ's love for us. We have an outstanding example of this in the story of the Philippian jailer (see Acts 16:16-40). When Paul and Silas were put into his care in

Acts 16 he casts them, beaten and bleeding, into the inner prison and fastens them in the stocks (Acts 16:22-24). Upon his conversion he takes them into his own home, cleans their wounds and feeds them (Acts 16:33-34). What a transformation! Why? Because the Philippian jailer, newly converted, had immediately been taught of God to love his fellow believers (see Acts 16:32).

To emphasise his point, John goes back to the very first murderer, Cain. *“Not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous”*, 1 John 3:12. Cain killed his brother, Abel, because he was jealous that God had rejected the gifts he had brought but accepted Abel's sacrifice (see Genesis 4:1-15). Instead of coming to God in the same way as Abel had, not in self righteousness but on the basis of the need of God's forgiveness, he kills his own brother (Genesis 4:8). There was a terrible hatred in the heart of Cain. He hated his brother for being accepted by God even though he could have come to God in the same way. Such unreasonable behaviour was further seen in the hatred Joseph's brothers had for him (see Genesis 37:1-36). This foreshadowed the unjust hatred the Jews had for the Lord Jesus which John had witnessed. So, John explains, we should not be surprised if Christians are confronted with hatred. *“Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you”*, 1 John 3:13.

On the other hand, love between Christians is evidence of new life in Christ. *“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death”*, 1 John 3:14. Love is at the very basis of the Christian faith. God's love was revealed in Christ especially in His sacrificial death upon the cross (See Romans 5:8). That love now abides in the hearts of His people and should be demonstrated in their lives. Hatred has no place in the Christian's heart. This is very challenging teaching. If we belong to Christ we should not engage in any action or thought of hatred against a fellow believer. John equates hatred with murder, *“Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him”*, 1 John 3:15. John had already demonstrated where hatred leads in the story of Cain and Abel and now warns his readers how terrible hatred is and of its incompatibility with true Christian faith.

John then takes up the sacrificial nature of God's love. How do we know divine love? By the sacrifice of Christ. *“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren”*, 1 John 3:16. Christ died for us and in doing so revealed the full character of God's love. *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”*, John 3:16. This love is replicated in the hearts of God's people so that we are willing to lay down our lives for each other. I believe this refers to selfless service towards each other which in extreme circumstances has led to the ultimate sacrifice. This love is proved in all the practical aspects of life as John explains in 1 John 3:17: *“But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?”*

There was once a prayer meeting in which a wealthy brother stood up and prayed at some length about the needs of poor people in the area. After the meeting had finished, a brother approached him and suggested he might use some of his money to answer his prayer! We all have to give account of how we use the resources God has given us, but the story is worth reflecting upon.

The young people's fellowship I belonged to many years ago had an allotment and grew vegetables. These were distributed to older people in the area. So began a successful work amongst senior citizens. The love of Christ needs to be shown in practical ways and John challenges us to do this. He appeals, in 1 John 3:18, again on the basis of the relationship we have been brought into by God's love, *“My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”* He warns against simply “talking Christianity”. The word of God is meant to be obeyed. This involves true hearts and loving actions. Christians have been accused of preaching full cream milk whilst living semi-skimmed lives! John helps us to get back to a true perspective of God's love. In Paul's words to Titus, *“Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.”* (Titus 2:13-14).

It is this combination of truth and action which proves the reality of true Christians: *“And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him”*, 1 John 3:19. We know in our hearts the reality of our faith and life in Christ. We can pretend before others but not before God because, *“For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God”*, 1 John 3:20-21.

John had the assurance that he was writing to true believers, who he describes as “Beloved” who had confidence before God. This confidence was based on obedience and lives which pleased God. As a result their prayer would be heard and answered. *“And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight”*, 1 John 3:20. In the words of James, *“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much”*, (James 5:16).

John concludes with fundamental commandments. First, to believe on the name of God's Son and secondly, to love one another. *"And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment"*, (1 John 3:23).

In 1 John 3:24, the final verse of 1 John 3, John writes, *"Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us."* 1 John 3:24 assures us that by believing in Christ and loving one another we abide in Christ and we know this communion through the indwelling Spirit of God.

The expressions "we know" (1 John 3:2, 14, 16, 19 and 24) and "you know" (1 John 3:5 and 15) occur seven times in this chapter and many more times throughout 1 John. The expression demonstrates the assurance the word of God gives to the Christian. In a world where we are increasingly told there are no absolutes, we can take heart that *"we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."* 1 John 3:16. God is love; God has loved us and we now love each other. It's time to live that life in all the full-cream of that wonderful love that God's has brought us into.

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