

Your Moral Resemblance to Christ

In the book of I John, the apostle lays out three tests to verify the authenticity of our faith.¹ The historical background for this book of the Bible starts with the movement of the center of Christianity from Jerusalem to the area around the Aegean Sea near the end of the first century. Tradition places the ministry of John in the town of Ephesus in this region after the Jewish dispersion of AD 70.

Gnosticism, a syncretistic blend of pagan, Jewish, and semi-Christian thought was coming into its own. Deserters were leaving, on one hand, or infiltrating, on the other, the true church in favor of a pre-Gnostic system of belief implying that they had found something higher in a spiritual sense. John, writing with the warmth of a pastor, comes into this setting of true believers feeling left behind and reassures them that they are the ones who hold the truth, not the deserters, by reminding them of who they are and what they know.

In its early stages, Gnosticism taught that the world is separated into a spiritual realm (good) and a material dimension (evil). Jesus of Nazareth could not be the God-man since He experienced death (associated with material, bodily, evil) as well as birth (equally material, bodily, and evil). They separated Jesus' divinity from His humanity by teaching that God came upon Jesus as His baptism and left Him before His death. This conflicts with what Jesus Himself said when He came into the world about being given a human body in which divinity dwelled as well as our understanding of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross being the work of the God-man.

A second error of the deserters was the belief that because the body (evil) and the spirit (good) were wholly separate, sin was no big deal. The function of our bodies belong to the material world which has nothing to do with our spirituality. Therefore we can do anything we want with our mortal bodies, because they are evil anyway and divorced from our spiritual life. Of course, this flies in the face of most of the New Testament teaching on sin.

Lastly, Gnostic thinkers claimed a spiritual aristocracy of enlightened minds that looked down with disdain upon "ordinary" Christians. They claimed a special knowledge that led to arrogance of the strongest kind. Christian love was out of the equation, again in conflict with the message of Christ.

Stepping into this philosophical concoction, John presents in his first epistle three tests directly related to Gnosticism. The theological test of belief is, "Did Jesus Christ come as God in the flesh?" The second test, the moral test, centers on obedience to God's commands; specifically, "What is our relationship with sin as true believers in light of the Gnostic belief that minimizes sin?" The third test, the social test, is characterized by love. "Since God is love in His essence, do we as His children love as He loves?"

The theological test is given in I John 2:21-23, "I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus (the man) is the Christ (the Messiah, i.e. of God)? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son, (does not adhere to Jesus as the God-man, God dwelling in the flesh) does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also." The thought continues in I John 4:2-3, "By this you know the Spirit of God; every Spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God."

The second test John gives is directed at the Gnostic view of sin. Believing that the material and spiritual world were separate led to the practice that sin was no big deal. To continue in sin had no bearing on one's spiritual life. Of course, nothing could be

further from the truth as John explains in the passage we are about to review in I John 2:29 to 3:10. (Scripture text is in red.)

²⁹If you know that He is righteous, (that God is righteous is a given throughout Scripture) you know that every one also who practices righteousness is born of Him. (Born of who? Born of God. I know you are born of God because I see the righteous resemblance between the two of you. It is a family resemblance because God is your Father. Is this statement too strong? Keep that thought in mind as we continue into chapter 3.)

^{3:1}See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. (John continues the family theme by calling us “children of God”.) For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know him. (Our resemblance is to God not the world, so the world does not recognize us because it did not recognize God when He came in the flesh.) ²Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, (Our resemblance is a little fuzzy now but will one day be made complete. We may not be the complete package yet, but we are clearly something different than what we were.) because we shall see Him just as He is. ³And every one who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (We are becoming pure as God is already pure. Our resemblance grows closer as we mature in purity.)

This is part of John’s moral test. If we bear no family resemblance to God in His righteousness, are we really members of His family? ⁴Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. (Of the several nuanced words for sin, lawlessness is the most emphatic and descriptive. It represents an open rebellion to God’s rule. And every one who practices sin winds up in the lawless camp, no exceptions. This practice of lawlessness is typical of those outside the family of God.)

⁵And you know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. (Our sins have been taken away by the Sinless One.) ⁶No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. (Fellowship with the Sinless One [abiding, knowing, seeing] and indulgence in sin is a contradiction.)

⁷Little children, let know one deceive you; (Let know one tell you otherwise.) the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. (The one who practices righteousness is practicing the character of Christ.) ⁸The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. (Sin is the character of the devil. He has been sinning, rebelling against God from the beginning.) The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. (Christ appeared to destroy the works of the devil. The primary of Satan’s works is sin itself.)

⁹No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. (When we entered into Christ’s family, literally “born of God”, the devil’s work of sin in our lives was destroyed. As a result, according to John, our practice of sin ended. Why? Because God’s seed now lives in us and God’s seed cannot practice sin.)

Now, to clear up any confusion, let’s focus on two points. First, the order of events is critical for our understanding. Membership in God’s family is brought about by grace, God’s favor, totally apart from our righteous works. No righteous acts on our part usher us into the family of God. Our salvation, our rescue, is totally unmerited. Membership in God’s family is *recognized* by family likeness, *not merited* by family likeness. In our lost state, we did not somehow become good enough to be accepted in God’s family. We came with nothing but the “empty hands of faith.” But after we came, we were given a new birth and with it a new nature, a new countenance, a new look that quite frankly resembles Christ.

On our second point, is John saying that it is impossible for believers to commit sin? The short answer is no. Elsewhere in I John (specifically I John 1:9 and 2:1-2), John talks about the advocate we have in Jesus when we sin and the repeatable process of confession and cleansing from sin. What can John possibly mean in chapter 3?

I believe the apostle is making the point that once we embrace the gospel message and enter into God's family, sin is not our natural way of life. We no longer make sin our regular practice. We no longer have a propensity toward sin. We no longer revel in sin. It no longer is our habit. Think about it this way.

Cows eat grass. It is in their nature to eat grass. When you were a kid lying on your lawn on a hot summer day, you probably thought grass looked pretty good. Especially if you missed lunch. So what did you do? You picked some grass, threw it in, and chewed it up. What did you find? Grass tastes terrible! You immediately spit it out along with anything else you could bring up. Why? Because it is not in our nature to eat and enjoy grass. Our nature is different from the cow's.

Sin is the same way. To a believer, sin tastes funny. What do we do with things that taste funny? We spit them out. Throughout the New Testament the theme for believers is this: SIN TASTES FUNNY. SPIT IT OUT! And the beauty of the whole thing is that because of the power of your new identity, your new nature in Christ, you can do it. You don't have to swallow.

Returning now to our passage to wrap things up. ^{3:10}**By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious:** (In either family, the children are known by their moral likeness to their father.) **anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.**

In this last verse, John summarizes the moral test and moves right into the social test. The social test revolves around loving as God loves. And what we will find as we explore love further is the incredible principle that love trumps knowledge. Look for this topic in a future post.

Your friend,

Jay

¹Stott, John. The Letters of John. Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1988.