

Study 4: 1st John Chapter 3

Introduction

The true test of our relationship with God is not one of “intellectual knowledge”, but is expressed in how we behave. In particular, it is in how we interact with other Christians. It is about putting our faith into practice. We have God’s assurance that we belong to Him, and John gives us the tests of that assurance.

Body of the Study

Introduction

Righteous Living

Loving one another

The Example of Cain

The Example of Christ

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 4 in preparation for the next study

How do our (physical) family characteristics influence our behaviour? In the same way, how does the characteristics of our spiritual family influence our character?

What does it mean to be a part of God’s family? What are some things that family members do for one another that are usually exclusively reserved for the family? (ie – we don’t do them for those “outside” of the family) How should we treat our spiritual family with these things?

What things in your life cause you to doubt your relationship with God? Read what John says in this chapter about the assurance that we have with Him. Work on a plan to work on your weaknesses, and ask for God’s help to implement it.

Notes for study 4: 1st John Chapter 3

The true test of our relationship with God is not one of “intellectual knowledge”, but is expressed in how we behave. In particular, it is in how we interact with other christians. It is about putting our faith into practice. We have God’s assurance that we belong to Him, and John gives us the tests of that assurance.

Introduction

The chapter really begins with the last verse of the second chapter “...*If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him...*” (1:2:29 NIV). John’s point – which continues through this chapter and into the next – is the assurance that we have as christians. He presents three tests of our assurance:

1. Our actions in doing the what is right
2. Loving one another
3. Testing the false teachers

As christians, we belong to God, and we need to carry the characteristics of Jesus by doing what He says, and behaving the way that He behaved. If we say that we belong to Him, but then don’t act that way, then we are liars (1:2:6). A life characterised by sin is not compatible with a life of fellowship with God.

Righteous Living

John draws attention to the wonder of God’s love for us “...*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!...*” (1:2:1 NIV). As he starts to prepare us to demonstrate our love for one another, we need to remember that “...*while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us...*” (Rom 5:8). As sinners, we were enemies of God, but He adopted us into His family. The natural things for humans is to hate our enemies, but God calls us to love our enemies, and He demonstrated exactly that trait in Christ’s sacrifice.

In contrast to the Gnostics – who claimed to know God, but denied Him by their actions – the christians were truly serving Him. The opposers must have tried to deny the true relationship that the christians had with God, and John assures them “...*The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him...*” (1:2:1 NIV). The problem isn’t with the christians, it’s with those who do not truly know God. This really should be no great surprise, because it is an exact parallel of the situation where the world did not recognise Jesus! In the end, approval by the world is something to be shunned, rather than desired.

John reminds us (by way of encouragement) “...*Dear friends, now we are children of God...*” (1:3:2 NIV). There seems to be an emphasis on *now we are*, as he makes a contrast to the future “...*what we will be has not yet been made known...*” (1:3:2 NIV). But we don’t need to worry about our “bodily” form. We just need to rest assured that we belong to God “...*But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is...*” (1:3:2 NIV).

As christians, we are called to righteous living. We cannot profess to belong to God and live in darkness “...*Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure...*” (1:3:3 NIV). This is not a statement of conditional reward (ie, that God will reward us if (and only if) we live a righteous life). The problem is that none of us ever has lived such a life (except Jesus!). Rather, it is a statement about where our hearts are. No-one who (truly) belongs to Gos would want to live a life that is tarnished by sin. We have purchased and washed clean by the highest price that has ever been paid. Why would we want to continue in sin?

John uses two words to describe sin here. Sin was regarded (in both the Old and New Testaments) as being a transgression of the Law (in the Old Testament, the Law of Moses, in the New

Testament, the Law of Christ). However, the Gnostics believed that they were morally without sin, or that the things regarded as *lawlessness* by society (which in fact was sinful) was of no concern to God. They were effectively claiming to not be subject to God's laws. Hence he writes "...Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness..." (1:3:4 NIV). John clearly shows that these two views of sin and transgression are equal in God's sight.

Not only is sin lawlessness, and lawlessness sin, but Jesus came to earth for the express purpose to wipe out our sins "...But you know that He appeared so that He might take away our sins. And in Him is no sin..." (1:3:5 NIV). He Himself overcame sin – both the power (consequences) of sin, and also demonstrated that power by living a perfect life Himself.

The only feasible answer from those who claim to belong to God is to live the same kind of life that Jesus lived (1:2:6) "...No one who lives in Him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen Him or known him..." (1:3:6 NIV).

John acknowledges that the life of righteousness is possible only in Christ. By "living" in him, in his "sinlessness," one can expect conformity to his righteousness. On the other hand, those who continue to sin make it certain that they have never had their eyes opened spiritually to see him, nor have they ever known him. (NIVBC)

With a clear and stern warning to the false teachers, John makes a statement of encouragement "...Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous..." (1:3:7 NKJV). The true proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the true test of christianity is how we put it into practice in our lives. In direct contrast, those who live a life characterised by sin declare who they really belong to by their actions "...He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning..." (1:3:8 NKJV).

But Jesus came with a ministry of reconciliation – He came to re-unite man back to God, by destroying the sin that separated us from Him "... For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil..." (1:3:8 NKJV). The clear conclusion that John makes is that whilst the Gnostics might claim to have come from God, in fact they come from Satan.

There is clearly a progression in the author's thought on sin in this section. He begins with the "sinfulness" of sin--i.e., "it is lawlessness," or rebellion against God (v. 4). Next he shows its incompatibility with Christ (v. 5) and its incompatibility for anyone who lives in Christ (v. 6). Now he shows the diabolic nature of sin--its source is the devil, who "has been sinning from the beginning" (v. 8). That the Son of God appeared "to destroy the devil's work" is an elaboration of what John said in v. 5. (NIVBC).

John sums up what he has been saying "...No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God..." (1:3:9 NIV). If God lives in us, then sin is incompatible with our lives. The whole argument culminates in verse 10 "...This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother..." (1:3:10 NIV). The prime concern is not a theoretical consideration, but a practical one for christians in the church! Jesus said *by their fruits you shall know them* (Mt 7:20), and then Paul described the fruit of the Spirit as *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* (Gal 5:22-23). God's concern is with how we put our faith into *practice*, and how we show it by *loving our brethren*.

Loving one another

The second theme of the chapter is the essence of the fulfilment of our relationship with God "...For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another..." (1:3:11 NKJV). John says that this was *the message from the beginning* – which is another way of saying that it is the original gospel, and not something that was introduced by the Gnostics. They must have been disregarding the message of love for one another by their actions.

In fact, Jesus said that love for one another was the thing by which all men would know that we are His disciples, and was something that He commanded us to do (Jn 13:34-35; 15:12, 17).

The Example of Cain

In a negative way, John uses the example of Cain as something not to do “...*not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother...*” (1:3:12 NKJV). Cain had no love for Abel – for if he did, then he would not have murdered him! “...*And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother’s righteous...*” (1:3:12 NKJV). Just as love was from the beginning, so hate was also from the beginning. Abel was righteous, and was persecuted by the evil Cain. It is a parallel to the situation where the righteous christians were being persecuted by the evil motivated Gnostics. He adds “...*Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you...*” (1:3:13 NKJV). It is not an imperative that christians will always be hated by the world. Jesus was not always hated by the society He lived in – but when the worldly people are exposed by God’s righteousness, then we should expect rejection and persecution.

Our assurance as christians that we are truly God’s children is confirmed by our characteristics. “...*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren...*” (1:3:14 NKJV). Passing from (spiritual) death to life requires a *new birth*. The confirmation of the new birth – and hence our spiritual assurance is shown by our demonstrating love for one another. It comes back to letting Christ’s characteristics shine through in our lives. But, if we don’t let these things happen, then “...*He who does not love his brother abides in death...*” (1:3:14 NKJV). We are still spiritually dead, and have not really grasped what it means to be *born of God*.

This is not something that is optional for christians. It comes back to the characteristics of Cain and Abel “...*Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him...*” (1:3:15 NKJV). By his actions of murdering his brother, Cain was cut-off from God. In a similar way, if we hate our brothers in Christ, we are not living as a child of God, and are therefore cut-off from Him.

The Example of Christ

John moves from the negative example of Cain to the positive example of Christ “...*By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us...*” (1:3:16 NKJV). If we want to know what true love is, then we just need to look at Jesus. Shortly before He died, He said “...*Greater love has no man than this, that a man would lay down his life for his friends...*” (Jn 15:13). These words are often repeated on Remembrance Day for the soldiers who gave their lives that we might live in a better world. But only a few hours after He said it, Jesus gave His life for us. He knew what was ahead of Him, and He knew the suffering that He would go through. Even more – He was the only righteous man who ever lived, and He gave His righteous life for us when we were sinners and didn’t deserve it. Here is love personified. It is a deep and intimate love that Jesus has for us, and it is the same kind of love that we need to display for others “...*And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren...*” (1:3:16 NKJV).

His sacrificial death thus distinguishes agape love from all other loves by its costliness, its unconditional acceptance of another, and its accomplishment ...The personal commitment of Christ is expressed in the words of Jesus: "Love each other as I have loved you." ... The dramatic conclusion we are irresistibly led to is this: "And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." We are to do this not simply because that is what Jesus did, but because that is what Jesus revealed to be the demand of agape love. Love is denial of self for another's gain. (NIVBC)

In contrast, if we love the world, and our goal in life is to seek after *fame and fortune*, then we have not really understood the message of the gospel – the message of the cross! “...*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?...*” (1:3:17 NKJV). It’s a test of where our heart and our love truly

lies. It comes down to putting our faith into practice, and John sums it up “...*My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth...*” (1:3:18 NKJV).

John returns to the test of knowing that we truly belong to God. He knows our hearts, and it is where our heart is that counts. “...*This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence...*” (1:3:19 NIV). The statement points backwards to the test of loving our brethren, and also forward to the statement “...*whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything...*” (1:3:19-20 NIV). If we truly are God’s children, then our hearts (our conscience) will be pricked whenever we transgress God’s will. God understands everything, and the true feelings that we have for Him in our hearts. We can rest assured in His love for us, which does not excuse our sin, although it does not lead us to accuse ourselves needlessly!

If our hearts are truly placed with God (remember that the hearts of the Gnostics were deliberately trying to deceive the brethren – 1:2:26), then we have no need to be afraid of God “...*Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God...*” (1:3:21 NKJV). We can face Him with confidence because we truly walk with Him. As a result, we “...*receive from Him anything we ask, because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him...*” (1:3:22 NIV). This does not mean that we get everything that we ask for – and if we don’t get what we ask for, then it is because there is something wrong with our faith! Our prayers must be in accordance with God’s will (1:5:14). But there are two parts to God’s will – His *revealed* will, which is what we know – and His *un-revealed* will. God will not grant our prayers if they do not conform to both parts of His will. We might completely meet His revealed will in our lives (ie – there is *nothing wrong* with our faith), but God has other plans for us. Further, if we conform ourselves to Him – we are *in tune* to His will – then the things that we *ask* Him will be in accordance with that revealed will.

God’s commandments to His people can be summed up in two statements “...*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...*” (1:3:23 NKJV). Our faith in Jesus is the key driver (but this doesn’t mean “faith” in the sense of belief only). Our faith is expressed in our obedience, just as it was in every case in faith’s hall of fame (Heb 11). Our faith causes us to obey God. In this verse, John says that we need to put our faith into practice by demonstrating our love to our brethren.

The section is summed up by pointing out that “...*Those who obey His commands live in Him, and He in them. And this is how we know that He lives in us: We know it by the Spirit He gave us...*” (1:3:24 NIV). The (Holy) Spirit is given as the assurance of our relationship with God. In the churches that John is writing to, the miraculous measure of the Spirit (given through the laying on of the apostle’s hands) provided positive evidence of God working through the disciples. But the indwelling Holy Spirit is God living in us – and He lives in all of us, because we have been born again (Acts 2:38; Rom 8:9)¹.

¹ For a fuller discussion on the Holy Spirit, see Romans, Study 10
Study of John’s Letters by Graeme Offer