



There are things in our culture that are morally acceptable and some things that are morally unacceptable. Let's use the color black to define things considered a sin—morally unacceptable, and white to define things good—morally acceptable. Let's start with the easy ones: murder (black); feeding the homeless (white); adultery (black); sponsoring a child with Compassion International (white); stealing a car (black); helping your neighbor mow their lawn (white); pornography (black); volunteering at school (white); lying (black); making an Operation Christmas Child shoebox (white).

These topics are easily identified as either black or white in our culture, but what if we make the subject a bit harder: the speed limit is 65 MPH and you're going 71 MPH (gray). Most of us could find a way to rationalize our behavior so we call it a gray area. "Borrowing" a pen from work (gray). We call it borrowing but really it's stealing because there is no intent to return it. Let's say a homeless person trespasses to find shelter from the rain for the night (gray). In reality the person is trespassing, so do we consider it a violation of the law?

It's interesting how some of these topics are so black and white to us, but when we began to venture in the gray zone it becomes more difficult. We're comfortable calling many things in life morally acceptable or unacceptable but where do we draw the line to the gray zone? I'm not saying there are no gray areas in life but how come we so often turn what is black and white into gray? Throughout John's letter we've seen the Apostle write to us about living in the light. Open your Bible to 1 John 2:28 and let's see how John defines the life of a Christian using very black and white terms.

Awaiting Christ's Future Return

John says there are three basic ways to test if someone is a believer: the relationship test—do they love those around them; the doctrine test—do they have the right beliefs; and the moral test—are they living the right life. In our passage this morning John is going to touch on the moral test of right living for a believer.

And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.

If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 2:28–3:3).

Once again we see John address the readers as "dear children," his favorite greeting. Immediately we're reminded to continue in Him which most likely is a reference to the end of verse 27 where John encouraged us to remain in Him. As John has already shared, the secret of Christian perseverance is to remain in Him. Now we finally come to the new topic—the return of Jesus Christ.

God's children are actively waiting for the return of Jesus Christ; it's a major part of our belief. We don't know when it will happen but it's what we've put our hope in. As John addresses this topic he hones in on the fact that when Christ returns there are only two responses available. Those who continue following Christ will not be ashamed at His return. In other words, they will have lived their life in the light and will be confident of their standing at His return. On the other hand, those who do not live their life for Christ will shrink back in shame at His second coming. The bottom line here is: The Lord Jesus is going to appear. We shall either meet Him with joy or shame, anticipation or regret. The way we live our life today will dictate our response at His second coming.

We have an abrupt change of person from verse 28 to 29; John shifts from speaking about Christ to speaking about God the Father. Those who do what is right have been born of God the Father. John changes up his use of language here from "dear children" to "children of God." Right here Christians are defined as Children of God who have been lavished with love from the Father. What would change in your life if you really believed you were a child of God? Take time to allow this love of the Father to sink into your daily life; allow the force of this to penetrate your entire being. Stand in amazement at the love God has lavished on you, standing breathless asking: "What kind of love is this?"

John keeps reminding us what we are is children of God and what we will soon be will be made known at His return. Now John's

words don't mean we're oblivious about the return of Christ or our future state. Of course we don't know the date of Christ's return or all the details of heaven. But we do know that on the last day we shall be like Christ and spend eternity with Him. We know this world has an end point and history is working itself towards the climax when Jesus will appear. It's like the Fourth of July; everything we do builds to the anticipation of a spectacular fireworks show, keeping our eyes fixed towards the heavens.

Because of this anticipation we purify ourselves, we actively purge our lives of sin in expectation of Christ's second coming. We allow no shadows to obstruct the light of Christ in our lives. This need to purify ourselves, John describes in verse 3, is based on the three events already mentioned—Christ's appearing, our seeing Him, and our becoming like Him.

When I was a high school pastor I met a young freshman named Kurt. He was the kind of boy the girls loved; good looking with a great smile. Shortly after taking leadership of the high school ministry Kurt joined my small group and we spent lots of time together. We would go snowboarding, wake boarding, cliff jumping and of course study the Bible together. Kurt eventually graduated high school and headed off to college. One winter, when Kurt was back on break, we went snowboarding. On the drive home I was talking with Kurt about life and how college was going. Kurt was probably anticipating the question to come from me; it was a question I asked all my small group boys regularly. Finally I asked Kurt how he was doing with his sexual purity. Even though all the girls loved Kurt, he made a commitment to Christ to remain pure and I had kept him accountable. I was thrilled when he told me he was sticking to his commitment and waiting until marriage. Kurt wasn't maintaining sexual purity because the opportunity hadn't been presented to him; Kurt maintained sexual purity so he could be found pure at Christ's return.

Christians who fix themselves on Christ's return will fight for moral purity. Moral purity isn't seen solely in external decisions. In Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth he wrote this encouragement to remain pure. *"Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God"* (2 Cor. 7:1). The encouragement is to purify ourselves from everything: this refers to the desires of the flesh and the desires of the heart. A few weeks ago I preached on 1 John 2:16 where John warns us about loving the world. The things John presents as sin struggles are seen visibly and are also hidden in our heart.

Children of God are a Reflection of the Father

John has given us his first argument for the need of holy living, since Christians await Christ's return. John now turns his attention to Christ's first appearance.

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him (1 John 3:4–6).

It makes sense he would address the fact that a person who claims to be a Christian must have a clean break with sin. How could a child of God be comfortable with sin? It's not just the fact that sin manifests itself in blatant disregard for God's law, but the very nature of sin is lawlessness. Lawlessness is the essence of sin, not the product of sin.

Since sin is rooted in lawless and destructive behavior we needed a solution for the penalty of sin. The solution God came up with was a radical plan. He would send His Son, His one and only Son Jesus Christ, to earth to abolish sin. Jesus would live as a perfect human not committing one sin, and the purpose for this was to take away our sins by His death on the cross. Now the only way the atonement of Christ works is if He never sins; if Christ were to commit one sin the whole plan was a bust. Only someone who was sinless Himself would be able to atone for the sins of others. God's plan was drastic but because God loves His children so much He was willing to do whatever it takes to restore the broken relationship.

John's logic continues in his argument for right moral living. Christ appeared to take away our sins, therefore we must stop sinning since we are now children of God. The believer has to wrestle with the fact that we're children of God, but we're also children of our earthly fathers and throughout our lives we've learned lessons from both of them. For most of us it's probably safe to say the lessons we learned from our earthly fathers, at a young age, stuck with us to our teenage years and well into adulthood. We'd rather have the lessons from God rooted in our lives but the lessons from our earthly fathers sneak back in every now and then.

We could spend hours on what we've learned from our fathers but let's narrow in on one illustration I learned from my dad: driving. Coming from a broken home I spent many hours in the car with my dad, driving back and forth from my mom's house every other weekend. As a young boy I witnessed numerous driving examples from both my parents but the ones from my dad seemed to stick with me. I learned that it's ok to speed, just as long as there are no cops around. I learned that when a car cuts you off it's ok to yell in anger. I learned a few choice words you can say to other people when they "get in your way." Please don't hear me just bashing my dad; he taught me positive driving lessons also but it seems the negative ones stuck more in my mind.

Fast forward from the young boy in the backseat to the man who just graduated Bible College. At the age of 24 I took my

first pastoral role at a church plant in Encinitas, CA. One day I was driving home from work and preparing to merge onto the freeway. My onramp was one of those large onramps with two lanes that merged into one before merging onto the freeway. This day there was a car next to me and we were pretty even entering the freeway when out of nowhere he cut me off in the merge. Out of nowhere my left hand flew out of my truck window with my middle finger extended to the fullest, as I told this person I thought they were number one in my book. I was ashamed, embarrassed. I wanted to quit being a pastor. I'm happy to admit to you that I haven't stuck my middle finger up like that in over nine years.

Where did this behavior come from? I learned this behavior from those around me in my youth; the behavior from my dad and friends was now being repeated in my life as a Christian. This sin is not only visible actions, like my driving story, but attitudes of our heart. The Prophet Jeremiah said, *"The heart is deceitful about all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"* (Jeremiah 17:9).

Thankfully John explains this to us and we become aware that no one who lives in Him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen Him or known Him. This is pretty strong language in regards to our actions. Before you close your ears and start questioning your salvation let me clarify. John's not saying the Christian will never sin again, but he is saying the child of God is now a reflection of the father and no longer remains in habitual, unrepented, sin. Another way we could say this is:

Children of God Strive to Live a Holy Life

How true is this! Children of God are striving to live a holy life; not that we're perfect at this but we're striving. The theological term we use for this is sanctification. Sanctification in a snippet means to be set apart. The Christian is set apart from the secular and sinful life so they can be used for the holy purposes of God. I imagine you can look back on your life and see the sanctifying work of Christ. Maybe you gave your life to Christ as a teenager and you once practiced the rule of a "California stop," but since then you've changed. Maybe as a college student you once cheated on tests but as a sophomore you accepted Christ and were conscious stricken so you stopped cheating your junior year. Maybe you once practiced cohabitation with your significant other but Christ convicted you and you've since stopped.

The external examples are easily identified but certain sins we constantly struggle with internally. For example, there's the person who keeps all the rules but jealousy is rampant in her heart. Then we have the believer struggling with coveting who constantly imagines what their life would be like if they had just married so and so. Finally we come to the man who on the outside appears to have his life in order but greed has its ugly hands

entrenched in his heart. This is just the beginning of the list; the invisible struggles are also what Christ came to sanctify us from!

This morning your habitual sin may be visible to all or hidden deep in your soul, either way, I think John is encouraging you to continue in the process; to continue to identify areas in your life where sin is ruling and address it. As the message builds, the logical conclusion would be we cannot expect to be confident in the day of Christ's return if we continue to live in unrepentant sin. The question we need to ask ourselves is—Where are there areas of my life I have unrepentant sin?

Children of God Live a Righteous Life

John's next thought follows a similar pattern from what we've just seen. Now John turns our attention to the purpose of Christ's first coming, which was to remove sin and destroy the work of the devil. He begins with the seriousness of sin, continues with Christ's impact on our lives and ends with an encouragement to continue living a life of holiness.

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. 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 God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister (1 John 3:7–10).

From everything we've read up till now we can clearly see John is drawing a series of pictures of two drastically different groups of people, climaxing in verse 10.

Who is the most vulnerable group of people in the world? The trusting nature of young children make them the perfect targets for those who seek to exploit them or lead them astray. Right now the international labor organization estimates there to be 10.5 million children in slavery. These false teachers were doing their best to pull God's children away from sound doctrine and right teaching. John does his best to assure the dear children, who are a prime target for the false teachers to lead astray morally and theologically.

This theme of doing what is right is repeated here several times. What does John mean by this and how are we supposed to know what is right, especially if you're the original reader battling the lies of the false teachers? Thankfully John has already laid out for us what is right throughout this letter. It's right to be in fellowship with God, with other believers, to confess our sin, to obey God's commands, to not love the world, to stick to right doctrine, to remain in Christ and to not keep sinning. These are

right actions we learned from John that we can apply to our lives as we remain in Christ.

The difficulty comes in verse 8 when we realize the devil is still around and up to his no good ways. Jesus Christ appeared to destroy the work of Satan but we won't see the finality of that until Christ returns at His second coming. In verses 8-10 we almost have a mirror image of verses 4-6. We see the reiteration of not living in habitual, unrepented sin but John adds to this. What is God's seed that remains in a Christ follower? The implication we can draw is a new birth. When a person accepts Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior they are born again. This involves them acquiring a new nature where the very seed of God is planted within us; the life-giving power of God brings a new hope to our life. As that seed is watered it grows and changes who we are from the inside out.

This week I had the opportunity to visit San Quentin Prison and help teach a preaching class to nine inmates. It seems like an oxymoron to say this, but I was encouraged by the incarcerated church! I had an opportunity to sit with a man—let's call him Jack—who five minutes into our conversation told me he has been in prison longer than I've been alive. That is a sobering thought. While in prison Jack encountered the love of Jesus Christ and is patterning his life based on Christ's return. This man was at one time living his life for the devil but God's seed was planted in him, while in prison, and now he's a new man! He made a shift in his life from being a child of the devil to a child of God. He lived a hopeless life in the darkness but now Jack is filled with the hope of Jesus!

Children of God are identified by the way we live our lives differently. If I wasn't a child of God what would compel me to drive an hour to spend time with men who may never leave San Quentin? John tells us in verse 10 that children of God are identified by living right and by loving others. John does not mean "love" as a

feeling but love expressed in caring, sharing, hard work, loyalty, generosity, buying Starbucks for them, long-suffering, patience, teaching, praying and listening. We're talking about love as a verb, not a noun. The encouraging part about this passage is many of you are living right lives, you hunger for sound teaching and your actions express your love for others. We should be encouraged from this message.

We now find ourselves in a spot to look back over the entire passage, over the 12 verses we discussed this morning where John laid out the moral test for us. Every message requires a different response from each of us. Let me start with the person who is here this morning who is curious about God. If you haven't yet accepted Christ as your personal savior, I want to invite you to become a child of God this morning. Take some time during our next worship song to have a conversation with God where you confess your sin and pledge your allegiance to Christ, parting ways with your life of sin and becoming a child of God.

The next response applies to those of us who've already made a commitment to follow Jesus. Throughout my message I asked you three different questions: (1) What would change in your life if you really believed you were a child of God? (2) Are there areas in your life where you have unrepentant sin? (3) How are you doing at living a right life and loving others?

Will you ponder these this week? If Christ's first appearance was to take away our sins and destroy the work of the devil and in His second-coming we will see Him and be like Him, how then could a Christian go on sinning? To continue in a life of sin would deny the purpose of both His appearances and diminish our hope as Christ followers. We have the hope of the world living in us. Let's shine as the light of the world.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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