



I had a very interesting experience last week with a church group that really put into perspective what we've been teaching in our Love Letters series. Apostle John's primary concern and reason for writing this letter is to address the heretical teachings from a group of people who were leading the church astray with false beliefs about God. They were living like pagans, and they were not loving one another. Some of them were teaching that Jesus was not God. Others were teaching that Jesus was not really human, but only appeared to be human. The church was in a dangerous mess. John was very concerned about their doctrine, obedience to God, and lack of love.

Sometimes when we read the Bible we think all that stuff happened a long time ago and is not relevant for our lives today. Last Friday I was driving along the east side of Burlingame off the 101 out by the hotels and noticed a building that looked like a church. The sign read, Iglesia Ni Cristo, Church of Christ. Since it was a building that we once looked at to house the North Campus, I wanted to see who these people were. So, I walked in and was immediately stopped by a very nice old man who invited me to their big outreach event at the Shoreline Amphitheater. I told him I was a local pastor and wanted to introduce myself and see what they were all about. Soon two other men in suits came out to meet with me as well. Apparently I was popular! I asked a few questions about their church, but didn't really get good answers, so I left wondering who this church is and what they are all about. I was a little creeped out by the whole interaction to be honest.

After a Google search I found out that this group is a fast growing cult of Christianity. They originally started in the Philippines and have now branched out all over the world. Why are they a cult? For one, they do not hold to the historic and orthodox teachings of mainline Christianity. Among other things, they do not believe Jesus is God nor do they believe in the Trinity. They teach that they are the one and only true church and you must be baptized in their church and attend their church to be a real Christian. They are led by a single charismatic leader and they hold an almost unbreakable grip on their members as well. You come to church right on time, tithe every week, and never question church leaders.

I am sure their churches are filled with nice, wonderful people who are sincere. But, if John were writing this letter today, there is no doubt in my mind he'd be addressing them. It struck me

how John's letter is just as relevant today as it was over 2,000 years ago. As a pastor I am very concerned that this group is operating right in our own backyard. Like us, they are striving to live right, they are doing good works, they love God, and they believe in Jesus. But upon close examination of their doctrine and their practice they are very different from us. Like Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses, Iglesia Ni Cristo claim to be Christians, but they are not. Some of you are going to disagree with me and say, "I know some good people in those churches. Aren't we all children of God? Who are you to judge?"

We can point fingers at cults all day long, but we need to look at ourselves in the mirror as well. How do you know if someone's a real Christian? Is it the fish sticker on their car or Bible on their desk? Is it that they don't use bad words, or they go to church a lot? The problem is, lots of people don't swear, and lots of people go to church. Are they all Christians? Jesus said that people will know we're disciples by our love. But again, lots of people love. We could say that a real Christian is someone who has accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior. That sounds pretty definitive, but is that all it takes—praying a prayer and raising your hand in church? I heard about a t-shirt you can buy that says, "And they'll know we are Christians by our t-shirts." Three out of four Americans describe themselves as Christians. How do you know if someone really is one? How do you know if you are?¹ John is going to address these very questions for us today as he continues to speak out against these false teachers. Let's begin by reading 1 John 2:28–3:3.

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.

A Child of God has the Transforming Hope of Jesus' Second Coming

John wants to be really clear about what a child of God is. What you believe about God and how you live are really important to John. A child of God first has the transforming hope of Jesus' Second Coming. The hope of Jesus coming again is what encourages us to live a holy life. John urges us to "continue in him." That means to remain, abide, and stay in Jesus. If we do that, we will be confident and unashamed at his coming. The reality is we all live in a fallen world. Sin continues to wreck our lives and cause havoc in our world. The nightly news is a constant reminder of that fact. Some of you have lost hope this morning. You see all that is going on in our world and in your own life and you're overwhelmed by it all. You may even be struggling with your own faith. You're trying so hard to live for God and do what is right, but find yourself tempted to just give up and give in to the world. John wants to encourage you! He wants to remind you of the fact that you are a child of God and one day Jesus will return to this earth and make all things right.

John uses two distinct words to describe the Second Coming of Christ. The first is the word *appearing*. This word describes the invisible becoming visible, something hidden being revealed. For thousands of years, in the Old Testament, God remained hidden from his people in a pillar of fire or smoke on a mountain. But, in Jesus Christ, the invisible God became visible. John was an eyewitness to this fact and saw, heard and touched Jesus. After three years of ministry, Jesus was murdered on a cross, he died, was resurrected in three days and ascended to the right hand of the father in heaven after appearing to hundreds of people. And while he was still with us by his Spirit, he is invisible once again. John tells us that one day, we don't know when (so stop guessing!), Jesus will come back. He'll be revealed and we'll "see him as he is."

The second significant word John uses is *coming*. This word was used to describe a king riding into one of his territories to be welcomed and honored by his subjects. Since there was no CNN or Youtube in the ancient world most people would live their entire lives without ever seeing their king. When a king visited a city, it was a big event, and people would line the streets just to get a peek at the king. John wants his readers to be reminded that Jesus will one day return in power and glory for the whole world to see. John wants us to wait expectantly.

Our goal while we wait for Christ to return is to be confident and unashamed. Do those words describe your relationship with God? If Jesus came back today, how would you feel? Confident and unashamed? Or fearful and unprepared? John is saying here that Christians live and act differently than non-Christians. God goes into a person's life and holiness comes out. We don't shrink back. We are not afraid. We have confidence in who God is and our relationship with him. To "continue in him"

means to continue to cultivate fellowship with God, something he's already challenged us to do. To "continue in him" means to obey God and love fellow believers; again, things he's stressed throughout this letter. If we are walking with Jesus now, if we are in relationship with him now, we have nothing to fear when he returns. If we are not in relationship with him now, then he is coming as the judge and you will be rejected. You have reason to fear.

John says this hope of Jesus' return spurs us on to purity. Jesus taught us in Matthew 5:8, "***Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.***" A person who is committed to Jesus is committed to a life of purity. This doesn't mean they will be perfect and free of sin. But, there is a commitment to purity in our lives. If you are a Christian, sin should make you feel dirty and unpure. We purify ourselves because Jesus is pure. We try not to sin because we want to be like Jesus. How do we purify ourselves? Through confession and repentance. John writes, "***If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness***" (1 John 1:9).

In my own life the process usually looks like this—God convicts me of sin, I go to him in prayer and confess it and by God's grace I repent of it. I turn the other direction and walk away from that sin. Then I repeat the process over again. Is there a sin you need to confess today? Do you need to repent of something today? The promise of Jesus is that you can leave here confident and unashamed, pure and holy. Jesus is coming. When Jesus returns, we will become like him. We will see him. That is a reason for hope. Are you looking forward to his return? Do you have confidence as a child of God that he's coming for you?

A Child of God is Overwhelmed by God's Love

We are still answering the question, How do you know if someone is a real Christian? John tells us next that they are absolutely overwhelmed by God's love. It's as if John was writing this letter and suddenly he is struck in a new way by God's love. Every once in a while when I am studying for a sermon, I'll stumble across a truth so wonderful that I'll stop typing, throw my arms in the air and say, "Thank you Jesus!" That's what happens right here in the middle of this letter, "***See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!***" (3:1). John is overwhelmed by the great *agape* love the Father has lavished on us. He can hardly believe it! And if that is what we are, children of God, then we have absolutely no reason to fear his coming. On the contrary, we look forward to it!

There is a four minute video on Youtube I watched this week called "Surprise Military Homecomings." It was several short videos of men and women coming home from overseas and surprising their loved ones at school, work, and at home. I cried my eyes out! It dawned on me that in the same way, if we're children of God, we should look forward to his return. We don't have to

worry about being “left behind.” We don’t have to run for cover. We’ll welcome him and we’ll embrace him. We’ll be united with our first love. God is your father and he is madly in love with you. Do you know you are loved by God?

Les and Leslie Parrott, in their book, *Relationships* said this about God’s love, “Consider the sun as an analogy. The sun only shines, just as God only loves. It is the nature of the sun to shine, to offer warmth and light. And it is the nature of God to love. We are free to get away from the sun—we can lock ourselves in a dark room—but we do not keep the sun from shining just because we put ourselves in a place where it cannot reach us. So it is with God’s love. We can reject it, but God keeps on loving us. No matter what our choices, God still loves. And because God loves us, a relationship with God is possible.” Because he loves you, he’s coming back for you. Does God’s love still overwhelm you? John continues his letter and wants to deal next with the struggle between a child of God and sin.

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.

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 (verses 4–10).

A Child of God has the Power to Fight Sin

A child of God has the transforming hope of Jesus’ Second Coming. A child of God is overwhelmed by God’s love. Finally, a child of God has the power to fight sin. Do you ever feel like there are certain struggles you have that you just can’t seem to get over? Is there a specific sin that you feel has you beat? In our fight against sin, John wants to remind us of what we are as a child of God and the power we have to live righteously. He says first, “everyone who sins.” John states a universal truth—we all sin. Some in John’s church thought they did not sin, but John keeps it real; we are all sinners. Then John defines sins. It’s not just doing something wrong. It’s more than missing the mark. Sin at its core is lawlessness. Sin is the anarchy of self. People in John’s church were being told that sin is not a big deal. Since we are all under grace, don’t worry about sin, they said. There

were even people in the church who claimed to be sinless! Some believed you could do whatever you want to your body because it doesn’t affect your spirit. So John reminds the church that sin is breaking God’s law and that is why it is so serious. Sin is not a personality problem and it’s not a character flaw; it’s a willful and deliberate act of disobedience against God. God loves us and has given us his law for our good and for our protection. But sin, at its heart, is rebellion against God. A child of God understands the wickedness of sin and takes it seriously.

John then thinks back to the first appearing of Jesus, when he came to earth as God in the flesh. Jesus appeared, he writes, to take away our sin and destroy the works of the devil. John is very black and white. He says there are people who love God and obey Him and there are people who don’t. There is not a third category. Since Jesus came to take away our sins, since he is without sin, no one who lives in him will continue to live with unrepentant sin. There is a source of tension this passage brings to light. I am a Christian and I still sin. In fact, I am a Christian and I habitually sin. It’s a struggle we all face. Does that mean I am not a child of God. Maybe not! John can’t mean we will never sin, because experience will prove we do. He doesn’t have in mind certain “super Christians” either who never sin. Some scholars suggest he is referring to a specific type of sin, willful and deliberate sin. But, even saintly people like King David and Apostle Peter committed big time deliberate sins. Others say that John is referring to habitual sin. But again, we all know Christians who struggle with sinful habits.

Here’s what I think John is getting at. I believe, once we become a child of God, our entire attitude and disposition towards sin changes. We cannot be comfortable with it any longer. We still struggle with sin, but we do not live in it as we used to. As a child of God, he’s given us the power to fight back and overcome sin. Is there a struggle in your life with sin? Is there a fight? That’s a good thing. Don’t throw in the towel and give up! John is telling us to remember who we are as a child of God. We have God living in us and that’s what he digs into next.

Throughout this passage John uses the phrase, “born of God” several times. How do we know if someone is a real Christian? John answers, they’ve been born of God. The Bible teaches that we are not born a child of God simply because we are human. We become children of God when we turn to Christ in repentance and faith and ask him to save us and make us into sons and daughters of God. Yes, we are all created in his image as human beings, but we become children of God. Again, John is black and white—you are either a child of God or a child of the Devil. John wrote earlier in his Gospel about this transformation process, **“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God”** (John 1:12–13). This is a metaphor of a new

relationship with God. Christians have been given a new life from God. We then live as his children. Our natures have been radically changed. God comes in, holiness goes out.

John takes this image even further and says, ***“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”*** (v. 9). The word for *seed* is the same word for sperm. Kind of weird right? What John means is that God’s seed has been planted deeply in the heart of a believer and this seed produces new life. This seed is both the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. Both help us to fight sin in our lives. Both give us the power to do what is right. And doing what is right, fighting sin, loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, are all signs of spiritual rebirth. They are all signs that we are true Christians. Once we’ve been born of God, we have the life of God within us. We will be like him. Becoming like Christ is not a possibility, it’s a promise.

J.I. Packer in *Knowing God* wrote, “If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.” How do we know someone is a real Christian? Their hope is in the Second Coming of Jesus. They are overwhelmed by God’s love. They have the power to fight sin. They know they’ve been born of God and they are his child. John wants us to remember who we are.

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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