

1 John 2:28-3:10
(Psalm 1; Matthew 12:46-50)
“We Are God’s Children Now”

Introduction

John wrote this letter to help us understand what it means to be a child of God and to know that we have eternal life (see 5:13). In the course of the letter, he develops three tests: a doctrinal test of whether or not we believe that Jesus is the Christ; a relational test of whether or not we love one another; and an ethical test of whether or not our love for God is expressed in active and joyful obedience to his commands. These are not the means of salvation, but rather the marks of salvation. As Dallas Willard says of God’s law, it is not the source, but the course of kingdom living. We are saved by trusting Jesus enough to follow him. And these are the marks, or the vital signs, of those who have known his grace and have entrusted their lives to him.

Our text focuses on the third test, the test that asks whether or not our lives and our conduct are being transformed by the gospel. At the heart of these verses is an appeal: “Abide in him [that is, in Christ] so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming” (2:28). John goes on to call us to a life marked by obedience rather than disobedience, marked by righteousness – which means right living. This is a bold appeal, and one that harkens back to words that John had heard Jesus speak during his final days of ministry: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Look with me at why this is so foundational to our confidence that we are God’s children.

Body

1. The first kind of reason for confidence is found in the Scripture:

God’s incredible love toward us in making us his children (3:1): literally, “Behold, from what country is this love?”

John is so staggered at how much God loves us that he asks, where is such love as this to be found? It is, quite literally, out-of-this-world. God, whose gifts we have taken and used for ourselves in ways that have caused pain and suffering, God whom we have turned our back on whenever we did not want to listen to him or believe in him or walk in his ways, this same God has loved us so much that he has poured out that love in the life, death and victory of his Son so that we might be reconciled to him. Why should we doubt and fear when the One who holds all things in his hands has invited us to be his children, and has shown us the way home? Our confidence rests first on God’s immeasurably immense love for us.

God's incredible provision in giving us the divine means essential to our abiding in Christ: "for God's seed abides in him" (3:9).

God has not only adopted us as his children, but he has given us his own life to begin to grow up and recreate us into the people we were always meant to be and have always longed to be. His seed may point to his Spirit or to his Word or to both, for both are essential for us experiencing the reality of his life within us. If you are God's child, you have, as it were, God's "genes" because he has graciously placed within you his own life. That life must be nurtured and fed and exercised in order to grow within us.

God's stated purpose in sending his Son: "The reason the Son of God appeared" (3:8) was to "take away sin" (3:5) and "to destroy the works of the devil" (3:8).

And when we resist sin and embrace righteousness, we know that we are acting in concert with that new life, because John tells us that Jesus came into the world to "take away sin" and to "destroy the works of the devil." When we turn away from the ways of life and fall back into old patterns of behavior, we are clearly choosing to live against the very reasons that Christ joined himself to us. John has just written, "the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (2:17). So we have confidence that we are his children when we are weary of sin and longing to do the things that lead to life and peace.

2. The second kind of reason for confidence is found in a disciple's life:

The evidence that we are becoming more and more like Jesus: we "practice righteousness" (2:29), and we "purify ourselves as he is pure" (3:3).

This is crucial, and is precisely where today's western understanding of the gospel is weakest: John writes to give us confidence, and he repeatedly calls on us to examine our behavior as a ground of confidence or of concern. He says that, based upon God's love, God's provision and God's will, one who has truly trusted Jesus is now, by nature, following him into paths of right living, right loving and right thinking. We are disciples, apprentices of Jesus our master teacher in the ways of the kingdom. To say that we are his while all the while pursuing the plans and schemes of the enemy is a contradiction in terms. If we are not becoming a little bit more like Jesus every day, we have reason for concern as to whether we are yet God's children. There is a family resemblance. The older we get, the more we take on the features of our families. The same is true in the family of God.

The evidence that we are becoming less and less like the devil: we do not "keep on sinning" (3:6&9) in the sense of making "a practice of sinning" (3:8&9).

The same is true with regard to the enemy, the devil, whose works Jesus came into the world to destroy. If we are following Jesus, learning from him, becoming

increasingly like him, then we must be becoming less and less like the devil. What does that mean? It means that old patterns of sin in our lives are being broken. We are being set free from the bondage to destructive habits and patterns, from the profound disorders and dysfunctions that too often mark our lives apart from Christ. Clearly, John does not mean that we will no longer sin. He has already written, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:8-9). But patterns of sin, repeated over and over, should raise flags and cause us to seek spiritual help and counsel, because it means that the enemy still is exercising power where he should have no power whatsoever.

The evidence that we increasingly “love one another” (3:10): we are willing to lay down our lives for one another, even as our Lord Jesus laid down his life for us.

This is always the great key. Righteousness, or right living, is always a matter of love. God’s law, rightly understood, is simply the natural expression of the desires of a person who loves God and loves others. Christ came to restore us to fellowship with God and with one another in a community of love, the kind of love that God has for us. And we have already seen something of this love: “See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (3:1).

Conclusion

It remains to ask ourselves whether or not our lives are being transformed by God’s grace in such a way that those who know us best can testify to the ongoing transformation. Are we abiding in Christ, “so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming” (2:28)? Are you and I willing to identify the hidden places in our hearts where we are being tempted to reject God’s amazing grace and love in order to pursue what is passing away, what can only lead in the end to guilt and grief and shame?

Do we love those whom God has entrusted to us? Are we willing to mend what we have broken, to repay what we’ve taken, to live no longer for ourselves but for the One who gave himself for us?

Only as we allow God’s love to flow through us to others will we ever find what we have been looking and longing for all our lives. If God’s seed – his life – is within us, nothing else will satisfy us, and nothing else will give us confidence in life and death that we are children of the living God.