

1 John 2:24-3:10
(Joshua 24:14-15; Matthew 12:46-50)
“By This It Is Evident Who Are the Children of God”

Introduction

There is a very popular and very necessary message being proclaimed today in Christian circles. It emphasizes God’s incredible grace toward us, and is often expressed in terms such as this: *there is nothing that you can do to make God love you either more or less than he loved you when he gave his Son for you.* In other words, God does not love you on the basis of your performance. He is not a demanding parent whom you and I are always trying desperately, but unsuccessfully, to please. That is true, and lies at the heart of the gospel.

However, if that message is permitted to stand alone without the rest of the gospel story, it is misleading and may even be soul-destroying in that it may give people a false sense of confidence before God, a confidence based on presumption rather than on God’s Word. Grace is not only incredible in its power to forgive and accept sinners like you and me, but it is also incredible in its power to make forgiven sinners like us new people in Christ Jesus. In fact, the Bible is clear from beginning to end that, *if we are not being made new, there is no biblical reason for us to claim that we are God’s children at all.*

It is, I think, this defect in our thinking and thus in our teaching, that has helped contribute to the shattering of so many lives and so many families in churches like ours. I’m sure that you are as saddened as I am at every report of yet another person walking out on a marriage, at every sign of God’s people living like the world around us, when Christ died, rose victorious, and poured out his Spirit on us, in order to make us examples before the world of life lived in the power of the gospel.

John wrote this letter for the express purpose of providing a practical analytical tool for determining whether or not we have been born of God, whether or not we have reason to hope for eternal life. In other words, he is dealing with the question of whether we can have assurance of salvation (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.

Our text focuses on the third and final 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). 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. On what basis are we to understand such a seemingly impossible appeal?

On the basis of God's incredible love toward us in making us his children (3:1): literally, "Behold, from what country is this love?"

On the basis of God's incredible provision in giving us the two means absolutely essential to our abiding in Christ: namely his Word and his Spirit (2:24&26).

On the basis of 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).

2. Then, on what basis may we have confidence that we are abiding in Christ?

On the empirical 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).

On the empirical 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).

On the empirical 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.

Conclusion

I plead with you to ask yourself this morning whether or not your life is being transformed by God's grace in such a way that those who know you best can testify to the ongoing transformation. If you are not sure, are you willing to ask? Are you and I willing to identify ruthlessly the hidden places in our hearts where we are being tempted to do what we want to do, even if it opposed to God's Word? Do we realize that temptation is the gymnasium of the soul where we grow strong by doing battle with the enemy in the power of God's own Spirit? Every battle won makes us stronger.

Do we love those whom God has entrusted to us, even to the point of forgiving them where they have hurt us and of covenanting again to love them faithfully unto death? 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 in such self-giving 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.

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