

1 John 3—Practicing Sin or Practicing Righteousness?

In 1 John 3:1-3, the author compares our current lifestyle to the hope that is in us which is to be “like Him (Jesus) when He appears” at the second coming of Christ. We are motivated to follow Jesus now and seek to be like Him now because we have that desired expectancy that Jesus is coming back for us and we shall be resurrected just as He was. John was expressing his wonder and amazement that sinners like us could become God’s children by receiving God’s grace. We who have believed in Him have become the object of God’s love. John begins with “See how great a love the Father has for us that we should be called children of God”. The inference is that in spite of us not deserving it, God has expressed His unconditional and sacrificial love for us by sending His Son to die as a sacrifice for our sins so we could be declared holy and be reunited with Him. Then John begins a series of contrasts in chapter 3 between true believers and unbelievers represented there by the false teachers that John is refuting throughout his epistle. John differentiates the two groups of people by establishing that believers have this great hope for the future in eternity, but the rest has no hope. We live now in the “already but not yet” life of believers who must live now in this rebellious world, but our assurance is that “when He appears, we shall be like Him”. We will be conformed to the image of Christ, but we have not experienced it yet. Paul says in Philippians 3:20-21, “our citizenship is in heaven from which we eagerly wait for our Savior...who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory”. Our hope and our motivation is in looking forward to Jesus’ appearing, our resurrection, and our eternal glorified state.

With That Hope, How Shall We Then Live?

In 1 John chapter one, the author draws a comparison with true Christians and the false teachers that were plaguing the church. The false teachers denied that they were sinners, and defended their immoral lifestyle. Besides, if Jesus died for our sin, what difference does it make? The false teachers professed Christ, but were habitual practicing sinners who defended their lifestyle. In chapter 3, John distinguishes true believers from the false teachers by saying that the former “practice” righteousness, but the latter “practice” sin. What does he mean by practice? In 1 Jn.3:4-10, all the verbs are in the present tense indicating present continuous action. His point is that they have a lifestyle pattern of practicing sin. The false teachers deny or excuse sin, and even justify their sinful behavior. True believers will not

habitually practice lawlessness (making up their own rules). It is incompatible with their relationship with Christ. This is not to say that Christians don't sin. John already established that we are all sinners who sin in chapter 1. The difference is that we are convicted by our sin, don't justify it, and seek to repent of it. In that sense we do not "practice" sin.

In 1 John 3:7, he says that Christians "practice righteousness". Since we are still not yet perfect, how is this possible? The righteousness he is referring to is the absolute perfect righteousness of Christ. In what sense do we currently "practice" God's absolute standard of holiness and sinless behavior? Because Christ has atoned for our sin, we stand innocent before God, and God has declared us righteous. It is not a righteousness that we have earned, but it is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. When we believed, God's Spirit indwelt us and changed us from within so that we had a sincere desire to seek Him and follow the example of Christ. This regeneration is a lifelong process being accomplished by God in us, but not forced upon us. Therefore from time to time we "blow it" and go our own rebellious way. Nevertheless, the Spirit convicts us of our weakness so that we confess our sins, and repent of our sins. We have an Advocate with the Father who is our High Priest, and God forgives us in the sense that we are restored to the abiding relationship to carry on our spiritual growth. In this sense we "practice" righteousness. We are seeking to know God and follow Jesus on a progressive basis, and therefore growing spiritually. This is what John means in 1 John 3:9 where he says God's "seed" abides in those who are "born of God". He is using an image of a growth within us like a seed growing under the ground to represent that internal dynamic of the Holy Spirit in us. This growth convicts us of sin and leads us to righteousness.

Three Big Issues

In ch. 2, John listed the three tests of faith, and now in ch. 3 he goes back over them. We practice righteousness, we love the brethren, and we know and believe the truth. What do these look like, or what is a good example? The author, in verse 12, uses the Genesis 4 story of Cain and Abel to illustrate the contrasts between believers and unbelievers, and in his case the church and the Gnostics (who also professed Christ). Like the false teachers, Cain's deeds were not only evil but he denied any wrong-doing, and cried out against his punishment. On the other hand, Abel was obedient by faith to God's word. Cain knew of God, and came to worship God, but he approached God in his own way, and not in accordance to the truth.

Cain, in his self styled religion ignored the requirement of God. Cain didn't love his brother, and committed the ultimate act of hate in murdering his brother. In the story of Cain and Abel, which follows the fall of mankind in Genesis 3, we can assume that God commanded them to approach God with a blood sacrifice for their sin. Abel loved God and obeyed God's commands, but Cain's sacrifice of grain was unacceptable in its prideful self-serving religion. That Cain murdered Abel made it clear that he was of "the evil one". Cain was the prototype of the worldly sinner who professes to know God and be religious, but in truth goes his own way and does his own thing.

Cain and Abel

Initially, I asked myself why John used the example of Cain and Abel to illustrate the difference between believers and unbelievers, but upon further review, I think it is the perfect example. The first prophecy of Christ in Genesis 3:15 followed the original sin of Genesis 3. From that time on, there would be a continuing conflict between the believing descendants of Eve and her unbelieving descendants who would unknowingly follow the devil by their rebellion. Adam and Eve were soon going to experience the reality of this predicted conflict through the events of their two sons. Cain and Abel were the first of the age-old conflict of the two "seeds" of Genesis 3:15. The story of Cain and Abel strikes at the heart of humanity as to the struggle between good and evil, believers and unbelievers, and our capacity for self destruction. In Genesis 4:1-8, we get few details and no explanations as to why the boys made different offerings to God, and why God had regard for Abel's offering and no regard for Cain's offering. We are beneficiaries of four New Testament passages which help us understand the story of Cain and Abel, as well as a wealth of passages that make it clear that the only way sinners can approach a holy God is through offering a blood sacrifice. The first two sons of Eve would illustrate the division of humanity between believers in God and unbelievers. We can assume that God had given Adam and Eve instructions, and they had instructed their sons on the proper way to approach God for forgiveness. Throughout the Bible God gave the necessity of substitutionary sacrifice as a prerequisite to approaching God. Since Cain had great pride in his vocation of farming, he resented the command, and in his pride decided to offer a sacrifice of his own choosing. Cain brought the fruit of his own efforts, but because it was not by faith in obedience to the truth, God rejected Cain's offering.

Before you side with Cain in thinking God was a little harsh in rejecting Cain, read on in

Genesis 4:5-7. Cain was VERY angry, but God patiently gave him a warning and a second chance. God told him he had no right to be angry, and if he did the right thing it would all be straightened out, but if he continued in disobedience sin would dominate him. Nevertheless, Cain's anger burned greater to such a level that he murdered Abel, hid the body, and then denied it to God. Pride, envy, and hatred blinded and dominated Cain just as God had predicted. In Hebrews 11:4, we read that by faith in God's commands, Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain. In Matt.23:35, Jesus taught that Abel was righteous and Cain was not, and of course in 1 John 3:12, Cain's works were evil but his brother's were righteous. The works in view in the story were the offerings that each presented God. In Jude 11, we read that the false teachers had "gone the way of Cain". What is the way of Cain, but disobedience to God's command to approach Him with a blood sacrifice? In the same way, all people who try to approach God in their own way instead of His way, have evil works, and are not believing in God according to the truth. The "way of Cain" involves selfish vain human reasoning instead of humility and obedience to God's truth. Cain's punishment was to be alienated and driven out so that he lived "east of Eden". All unredeemed sinners who live independently of God's truth continue to live "east of Eden" where they are alienated from God.

In 1 John 3:10-12, the Apostle John used the Cain and Abel story to make the point to the churches in Asia Minor that the false teachers who were trying to deceive them by altering and adding to the truth about Jesus were going the way of Cain. They came up with their own truth that was opposed to God's truth. Cain knew of God, approached God in his own way, but not in accordance to the truth. Cain's sacrifice was unacceptable in its self serving prideful religion. Cain was the prototype of all people who come up with their own way, meaning all world religions designed by people. What is the truth from God but the command that 1 John 3:23 gives us, "And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us."

The Grace of God to Those East of Eden

Hebrews 12:24 also mentions the story of Cain and Abel to make the point that Jesus is the author of a new system of justice, and Jesus' shed blood on the cross shouts forgiveness to all who believe in Him and approach God truthfully through His blood sacrifice. Hebrews 12:24 quotes Genesis 4:10 where God told Cain that He was aware of his sin because "the voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground". Cain may have thought he had

covered up his crime, but God knew his sin and He knows ours. The good news is that the sacrificial blood of Jesus speaks louder and better than the voice of sin (metaphorical). The blood of Abel cries out, but the blood of Jesus atones for all sin of all who respond to God with faith according to the truth.

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