

# Loving Obedience

I Jn 3:1-11

Intro:

The epistles of John are unique among the New Testament letters. Written by the last living apostle, these letters carry a distinct sense of urgency to the early church. As we've seen, John wrote these letters to help new believers and early church leaders discern between true church leaders who operated under apostolic authority and false teachers who were spreading a hybrid synthesis of Christianity, Judaism and eastern mysticism. John provides three litmus tests to aid in this process.

- The doctrine test asks the question "What do they say about Jesus?"
- The obedience test asks "How do they live their lives?" And
- The love test asks "How do they treat other believers?"

Now, if Paul were writing this letter, he would logically organize the material giving two chapters to each test in succession, but John takes a different approach. Bible commentators have always had a difficult time providing an outline for First John, because John's approach is to weave the three themes together throughout the book. He will describe the doctrine test in one paragraph, then the next paragraphs describe the relationship of the doctrine test to the obedience test and the love test. Then, he describes the obedience test, but backtracks to describe the relationship of this test to the doctrine test and the love test, adding significant layers of meaning and thematic development to each restatement of the theme. In the margin of my Bible I have written "D," "O" and "L" for the doctrine, obedience and love tests as they appear in the text, and the margins are full of repeated "Ds," "Os" and "Ls." Unlike Paul, he doesn't write long, cascading sentences with multiple asides and parenthetical explorations. His sentences are shorter, his language plain. At first blush, John's prose seems simplistic and repetitive. Upon further examination, we realize that John deals masterfully with profound theological issues using brief sentences and simple words.

Another literary technique used by John is the juxtaposition of thesis and antithesis. Over and over, he helps us understand one concept by immediately comparing it to its opposite. As the three themes tumble and weave over each other, the phrases pivot back and forth between thesis and antithesis. Look for example at verse 6, which says,

No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. [*and then the antithesis:*] No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. (3:6)

This technique is used scores of times in this short letter. I suggest that the best way to understand 1 John is to read the book aloud with a pen in hand, noting the development of the themes and John's manner of explanation.

In the same way that commentators have had a hard time outlining 1 John, there are also diverse opinions on the central theme of the book. "Joy" has been suggested by many as the book's theme. Our senior pastor considers "love" to be the central theme, hence the

title to this series, “The Summer of Love.” I’d like to suggest a word that I have not seen in any of the commentaries (which is almost always a bad idea, but I want to pursue the thought with you anyway). I suggest that the central theme of the book is “integrity.” We all know what integrity means, when something or someone is integrated, all the parts fit and the whole is an accurate representation of the parts. When a person is dishonest, disloyal or unreliable, we say that they are lacking in integrity, because their bad behavior has suddenly revealed the person they truly were all along.

The central point to John’s epistle is that you cannot routinely act in a manner that is inconsistent with who you truly are, and that if a self-appointed spiritual leader either says wrong things about Jesus Christ, lives in persistent disobedience to Christ or mistreats other believers, they are not members of God’s family despite their assertions to the contrary. In fact, he calls these people “children of the devil.” He is concerned about false teachers moving among the flock and he does not mince words in pointing them out. In verse 10 he writes,

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 a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. (3:10)

So let’s turn our attention now to the third chapter of John’s letter. There’s an outline in your bulletin for you to follow along. The first thing John describes for us here is

## **I. An incredible truth.**

Listen to what John writes in verses one and two:

How great is the 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 he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1, 2)

I wish I could spend all my time today on just these two verses. It’s fascinating to imagine how our lives would be transformed if we could fully grasp the depth of these words. John uses some of the strongest words of wonder and amazement found in the New Testament to describe the love of God. Luke used this same word to describe Mary’s amazement at the angel’s visitation and Mark used this word to describe the response of the disciples to Jesus’ calming of the storm when they said, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” God’s love for us is a shocking, amazing, surprising, incredible love. So in the first verse, John describes for us

### **A. A current relationship.**

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! If you’re filling in the outline, I want you to jot a note to yourself. Write down, “I am a child of God.” How might our responses to life’s situations be changed if our

starting point was a settled confidence that we are children of God? Repeating to ourselves, “I am a child of God” can sustain us when the job is lost and financial pressures begin to mount. Reminding ourselves that God has chosen us as his child would give us comfort when a relationship painfully falls apart or when a dear loved one goes home to heaven. When the doctor says, “We’re not sure what’s going on, we’re going to have to run some additional tests,” how Christ’s peace would sustain us by remembering “I am a child of God!” This is not just wishful thinking or whistling in the dark, God the Father has lavished his amazing love on you and me and has made us children of God. And lest we be tempted to read too fast and overlook the power of this point, John adds the reinforcing phrase:

...and that is what we are! (1)

Our current relationship? We are children of God...that is who we are!

One of the proofs that we have been adopted as children of God is seen not only in a new relationship to God, but also in a new relationship to the world, not the people of the world whom God loves, but the world’s system of humanistic self-reliance and rebellion against God. John goes on to say,

The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. (1)

“Him” here of course refers to Christ. But we may stop to ask, “Is it really true that the world doesn’t know us?” You could make the argument that the church has considerable influence in our world. “In God We Trust” is printed on our money, and the words “under God” are still in our pledge of allegiance, millions of people around the world go to church on Sunday, we still have a “National Day of Prayer” each May. Why does John say, “The world does not know us?”

The key is in defining the word “know” used here. John didn’t use the root word *gnosis* here, the word that describes simple intellectual assent, like “I know where India is on the map.” John uses the stronger word *ginosko*, the word that would be used by the person who could say “I know India because I lived there for ten years.” *Ginosko* is a more intense word, the word that was used in John’s day to describe intimacy between a husband and wife. Of course the world “knows” who we are just as it “knows” who the historical man Jesus was, but the world system that denies the righteous rule of God does not embrace the Christian message of sin, judgment, redemption, forgiveness and salvation. We are in the world, but we are not a part of the world and the world does not *ginosko* us. Jesus predicted this in John 15:18 when he said,

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. (John 15:18)

So this first verse describes not only a current relationship, but also

### ***B. a future transformation (2-3)***

Listen for the past, present and future in these verses. John goes on to say,

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like

him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. (1 Jn 3:2-3)

Again, the prose seems simple but the concepts are profound. He begins with a restatement of the “now” and then moves to an anticipation of what will be in the future. At the end of chapter two John had written about Christ’s return, saying

And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. (1 Jn 2:28)

and he reminds us here again that Jesus will one day reappear. Next, he tells us that the act of seeing Jesus in his splendor and majesty will complete our transformation into his own image, but that in the meantime, we who hope in Christ have the responsibility to purify ourselves just as Christ is pure. Past action, future anticipation and present activity. This all begins to sound a bit confusing; now we are God’s children, but Christ will transform us in the future, so we should be purifying ourselves now? What is he talking about? Theologians use three phrases to describe this process: First, there is

- *Positional sanctification*: through the finished work of Christ. “Now we are the children of God.” (In the future, there will be)
- *Ultimate sanctification*: “we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” (But until that time, there is)
- *Progressive sanctification*: we purify ourselves, “just as he is pure.”

It’s hard to imagine how a Christian can read verses like this and yet somehow become bored with their faith or weak in their gratitude to Christ for all he has done for us. Dr. Vance Havner used to say that Christians slowly lose their appreciation for eternal things because we are guilty of playing marbles with diamonds. That is, these incredible truths of God’s love, our adoption, Christ’s return and our future transformation become so common to us that we lose sight of their greatness. Perhaps this week we should all slip a copy of 1 John 3:1-3 into our pockets and read it over and over again until, like John, we once again stand amazed at God’s love.

Let’s move now to the remainder of the passage. After describing an incredible truth, John goes on next to tell us about

## II. An overcoming life

This set of verses contains some of the clearest, most decisive words written by John. It is not John’s purpose to deal with nuance or explore gray areas of meaning. He uses clear, unmistakable black and white language to describe two different groups of people. The first group are true believers, children of God, followers of Jesus Christ who do not sin, destined for victory. The second group are counterfeits, unregenerate, children of the devil who habitually practice unrighteousness, destined for destruction. John is writing here from the standpoint of full apostolic authority. Listen to the power and urgency of his tone:

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He 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 him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. (1 Jn 3:7-9)

John introduces two important truths here that will lead us to an overcoming life. First,

### ***A. Christ took away our sins and frees us from a life of sin.***

Here's what John says in verses five and six:

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 Jn 3:5-6)

John is not suggesting that a Christian will live a sinless life, and he is not advocating what some call "sinless perfection." John fully understands that as long as we are in these mortal bodies we will continue to struggle with sinful impulses. In chapter two he said:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense— Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 Jn 2:1-2)

So while at face value it appears that John is saying "if you commit a sin you aren't really a Christian," that is not his intent. There are several truths we can glean from the New Testament teaching about the relationship between believers and sin.

First, in the Bible "sins" in the plural form often refers to individual offenses that have been atoned for by the sacrifice of Christ, and "sin" in the singular form often refers to the old sinful nature we inherited from Adam that led us to sin.

Second, Christ's sacrifice paid the penalty for our sins, and in the sense that we died with Christ, the old sinful nature and our obedience to that sinful nature died with Christ. This dying with Christ and being raised again with him in his resurrection is beautifully dramatized by baptism by immersion.

Imagine for a moment that we went to the funeral home and popped the lid on dear old uncle Charlie. He's laying there peacefully with his hands folded, and the one thing we would all agree on is that there's no way uncle Charlie is going to commit any more sin. Why? Well, because he's dead, of course. This is Paul's point exactly when he writes in Roman 6 that because we and our old sinful nature died with Christ, we are now freed from a predisposition to sin:

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. (Rom 6:5-7)

So, when we commit sin, it is because we have chosen to do so, not because we have to. In that instant we foolishly deceive ourselves into believing that we will find more happiness and fulfillment by indulging in that sin than we will by obeying Christ. But

while that sin may temporarily hinder the fullness of our relationship with God, we are not suddenly expelled from God's family. Remember in chapter one John said that believers "walk in the light as He is in the light?" When we sin, we don't suddenly dash off into the darkness where God cannot see, we sin in the full floodlight of God's presence.

Third, sin in the life of a Christian is quickly accompanied by a sense of guilt, remorse, sorrow, contrition and repentance. We know we have disobeyed God and his Spirit pricks our conscience. These are the hallmarks of the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts.

So in chapter three, John is not talking about a true believer who occasionally sins. He is referring to those who live a life of regular, habitual sin with no sense of remorse. The Holy Spirit is not at work in the heart of the unregenerate, and they give full vent to their sinful nature. John refers to this condition as "lawlessness" in verse four when he concludes:

...all sin is lawlessness. (1 Jn 3:4)

Finally, to lead us to an overcoming life Christ has not only dealt with our sin problem, but also,

### ***B. Christ defeated the devil and leads us to victory.***

So John concludes with these words:

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 him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has 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 a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. (1 Jn 3:8-10)

The first part of chapter three has been focused on the "obedience test," but in that last line we see John reaching over to pick up the cord of the "love test" to continue his weave.

The word John uses for "devil" here is "diabollos," literally, the one who throws words or accusations. The devil is a vicious accuser. Sometimes we hear him speaking to us using our own voice, "You're worthless, you're so sinful, you'll never overcome that sin. You really can't help it, after all. Besides, you deserve to be happy, and you're not really hurting anyone else anyway." Or sometimes we hear, "God can't love you after what you've done. Do you really think you deserve to be forgiven?"

John says the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. The word translated "destroy" here literally means "to release." We are released from all the accusations and false guilt the enemy hurls our way. In the book of Romans, Paul reassures us with these words:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God

who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. (Rom 8:31-34)

To some degree our enjoyment of the Christian life is determined by who we choose to listen to, either to the lies of the accuser who wants to defeat us, telling us that we are unworthy and unloved, or to the truth spoken by the Savior, the one who gave his life for our redemption, who wants to lift us up, reminding us that we are holy and dearly loved by the Father in heaven. You are a child of God.

First John 3 tells us of an amazing truth that leads to an overcoming life. Being reminded of these truths should fill our hearts with joy and gratitude for what Christ has done. The words that you see on the screen are also provided in your bulletin. I hope you'll take them with you and read them many times this week to remind you of who you really are. I'd like to ask you all to stand with me now. We're going to read these words aloud enthusiastically and joyfully, with the same gusto you shouted the "yes" and "no" of Easter a few weeks ago.

Let's celebrate God's work together:

Because of the amazing love of God  
I am now a holy child of God.  
One day Christ will return in power,  
and the sight of his majestic holiness  
will complete the spiritual transformation  
he began in me at the moment of my salvation.

Until that time, I must devote myself to sanctification,  
the purifying process of spiritual growth that comes  
through prayer, Bible reading and Christian fellowship.

The devil presently holds the unregenerate  
in slavish bondage to sin.  
He viciously accuses me to my face  
and before the throne of God,  
but he has been completely vanquished  
by the work of Christ on my behalf.

The angels of God war against the devil,  
and Jesus Christ, the Son of God stands  
before the throne of God in heaven  
to defend me as righteous, holy and blameless in his sight.

I walk each day in the unrelenting light of God's presence.  
I am completely forgiven of all my sins,  
completely free not to sin,  
completely sustained by Christ's abiding presence,  
and completely confident of eternal life in heaven.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in my life  
is the seal of my inheritance as a child of the Most High God.

I claim it now as my own  
and will possess it fully on the day of Christ's return.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

## Loving Obedience

1 John 3:1-10

Because of the amazing love of God I am now a holy child of God. One day Christ will return in power, and the sight of his majestic holiness will complete the spiritual transformation he began in me at the moment of my salvation. Until that time, I must devote myself to sanctification, the purifying process of spiritual growth that comes through prayer, Bible reading and Christian fellowship.

The devil presently holds the unregenerate in slavish bondage to sin. He viciously accuses me to my face and before the throne of God, but he has been completely vanquished by the work of Christ on my behalf. The angels of God war against the devil, and Jesus Christ, the Son of God stands before the throne of God in heaven to defend me as righteous, holy and blameless in his sight.

I walk each day in the unrelenting light of God's presence. I am completely forgiven of all my sins, completely free not to sin, completely sustained by Christ's abiding presence, and completely confident of eternal life in heaven.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in my life is the seal of my inheritance as a child of the Most High God. I claim it now as my own and will possess it fully on the day of Christ's return. Thanks be to God! Amen.

- I. An incredible truth (3:1-3)
  - A. A current relationship (1)
  - B. A future transformation (2-3)
- II. An overcoming life (3:4-10)
  - A. Christ took away our sins and frees us from a life of sin (4-7)
  - B. Christ defeated the devil and leads us in victory (8-10)

1 How great is the 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. 2 Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. 3 Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

4 Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. 5 But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. 6 No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 He 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. 9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. 10 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 a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.