

Sermon File # 1047

Scripture Text: 1 John 3:4-10

Sermon Title: *Whose Child Are You? The Marks of a True Christian*

Manuscript written and sermon preached by Roger Roberts

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact roger.roberts4575@gmail.com.

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Whose Child Are You? The Marks of a True Christian

Introduction:

Today we continue our series from 1 John, a pastoral letter with the purpose of encouraging believers to examine the validity of faith in Christ, and whether or not we have received the gift of eternal life (5:13). As we've noted, John gives tests for self-examination in three basic areas of life—our belief in Christ as the incarnate Son of God, our moral conduct, and our love for our fellow believers.

Last Sunday we looked at 2:28-3:3, concluding that our hope as God's forever children strongly motivates us to become like Jesus, whom we shall someday see face to face and then share his perfect holiness. In the successive verses, our text for today, John "appears to envision the case of those who do not emulate Christ's purity in their lives as 3:3 asserts." The apostle draws a sharp contrast between the hope-filled, purified believer and the sinful transgressor (Yarbrough, 181).

As we've noted, the apostle John is countering the claims of the Gnostic false teachers who were confusing the churches with their claims of sinless perfection or that immoral behavior had no impact on the soul. In other words, to these false teachers, sinful behavior was either nonexistent or unimportant (Smalley, 168). Although John's letter was written two millennia ago, his message addresses the mindset of today's New Age philosophers and practitioners who say that one can rise to elitist levels of spirituality without any regard for biblical truth or morality (Davids, 208). John, on the other hand, gives us in our text the marks of a true Christian.

Follow as I read **1 John 3:4-10**.

Because of the plethora of false teachers and claims that had infiltrated society and even the churches of 1st Century Asia Minor, John found it necessary to provide in his letter a "simple guidebook" to help one assess all claims of being a child of God, a "spiritual who's who" to help believers sort through the various claims and ideas being tossed around (White, 81, 83)

I dare say that we need to pay heed to the useful and important guidebook we are given in Scripture, and particularly in books of the Bible such as 1 John, not only in light of the thousands of cults and bizarre religions in the world (in North America and Western Europe in particular), but also in light of the confusion and false teaching that can infiltrate even the usually orthodox evangelical church. Jesus told the Parable of the Weeds to teach the unavoidable admixture of false believers and true disciples in the visible church (Matthew 13:24-30).

John gets to the very heart of the matter as he describes the character traits of the true believer, the true child of God and those of the unbeliever, the one who has not been genuinely converted but has become part of the congregation of those who profess faith in Christ. He basically asks, "Whose child are you?" as he describes the marks of a true Christian.

In the early 90's, a fertility doctor was given a prison sentence of 280 years for 52 counts of fraud and perjury. Dr. Cecil Jacobsen preyed on infertile couples by injecting women with hormones to give the illusion of pregnancy and also inseminating patients with his own sperm, which he claimed came from an anonymous-donor program. By his own admission, Jacobsen impregnated several unsuspecting women with his own sperm. And "in emotional testimony, 11 patients, supported by DNA tests, described their horror at learning that Dr. Jacobsen had fathered their children." He may have fathered as many as 75 babies, prosecutors said (*Newsweek Magazine*, March 16, 1992).

This is a strange phenomenon, to be fathered by a total stranger, or to have a child fathered by someone you don't know except as a physician, and a crooked one at that! Most adopted children probably will never know their natural birth parents, but will hopefully be at peace knowing they have been adopted by parents who love

them and will rear them into adults who share the character traits of the adoptive parents. Scripture employs the analogies of God's children as both born of God and adopted by God (e.g. Ephesians 1:5), and in our text John seems to have in mind a picture of God's true children who understand who their real Father is, who share his characteristics through rebirth and obedient living. John says first of all that...

True Christians have experienced a spiritual birth

Unlike the artificially and deceptively inseminated patients of Dr. Jacobsen, God's children know their Father and are known by him through a spiritual birth. Verse 9 leaves no room for doubt in this regard, with the phrase "born of God" (*gennao*) "standing like bookends" at the beginning and ending of this verse (Yarbrough, 194). True Christians are born...

By God's Spirit

John also uses the word "seed" (*sperma*) to augment this vivid image of being conceived as God's children. The Virgin Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit who conceived within her the Son of God (Luke 1:35), and so the Spirit causes us to be born again, that is, from above, with a heavenly, spiritual birth (John 3:3-8). Peter says it is by the living and enduring word of God that we have been born again, through "imperishable seed" (1 Peter 1:23). When we as sinners turn to Christ in repentance and faith, we receive a new nature as God's children, as his new creation (2 Peter 1:4; 2 Corinthians 5:17), born anew by the Spirit and the word.

John says this is the reason for Christ's appearing, i.e. his incarnation, to take away our sinful nature and to destroy the strangle-hold that the devil has had upon us, giving us a new nature as God's children (5 & 8). And we know that the devil, though mortally wounded and defeated by the cross, is nevertheless alive and desperately kicking. The word "destroy" in our text doesn't mean to annihilate but rather to break down and render ineffective (Comfort, 2144). The reason Christ suffered and died on the cross was to pay our sin debt and to put to death the power that sin held upon our unconverted nature. This is what Paul means by our being crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20); and also, because of Jesus' resurrection, we are raised by the power of God to live a new kind of life (Romans 6:4).

John no doubt remembers Jesus' confrontation with his enemies, who claimed their spiritual pedigree was from Abraham, whom they said was their father. Jesus countered their claim, saying that if they were really the children of God they would love and understand him. In fact, Jesus said, they were actually children of the devil, reflecting his character as a murderer and a liar (John 8:42-44).

And this is the hard truth we must all face, even though we may claim to be good, even religious people. Our spiritual parentage, says John, is either divine or diabolical (Stott, 128). To be outside of Christ doesn't mean one is as evil as

possible, or even wishing to be associated with the devil in any fashion. But apart from Christ's gracious rescue through the cross and the rebirth, we are nevertheless under the sway of the Evil One and liable to his deceit and headed toward destruction with him and his demons. We are all in desperate need of Christ's redemption through his cross. This is why he paid such an ineffable price for us—only his cross and shed blood could pay our sin debt and only by the power of his resurrection can we be made new creatures and become the redeemed children of God (1 Peter 1:18f).

True Christians have experienced a spiritual birth by God's Spirit...

Resulting in a personal relationship

As the children of God we have been born again and given a new standing with God. We are justified by grace through faith and receive God's complete pardon for our sin. Yet we must never take this free gift of justification for granted. The only way we can make our calling and election sure, that is, be certain we are justified, is to continue in a personal relationship of love, faith and obedience toward Christ (2 Peter 1:10; Colossians 2:6).

In verse 6 John reminds us that we must keep on abiding in (live in) Christ, which results in our continual growth in Christ-like character. Abiding (*meno*) means remaining steadfast in a continual, dependent fellowship with Christ (Comfort, 2144). This "notion of abiding" is central to John's teaching (Yarbrough, 191) and determines the outcome of our way of life. John is saying, "No one who continually abides in him makes a habit of sinning" (Morris, 1265).

If we have been truly born from above, "the fruit and effect of divine adoption" will always appear in our lives (Calvin, 274). We have the promise of an everlasting relationship with Christ, even when we stumble in sin and at times languish in doubt and spiritual depression. If we are truly converted, we cannot lose our *relationship* with Christ but we can lose, at least momentarily, our *fellowship* with him. And a true believer, while suffering this interruption of fellowship, will be in a state of spiritual misery (Romans 7:7-25).

As long as we remain in these mortal bodies, we will commit sins due to the downward pull of our old, fallen nature, as John explains in 1:8-2:2. But sin will not be the dominant force in our lives because we are given new life in Christ, a regenerate, re-born nature, a new desire to please God, and the power of the Spirit to enable us to live to please him. In our text, "John is arguing rather the incongruity than the impossibility of sin in the Christian" (Stott, 126f).

True Christians are born again into God's family. Rebirth doesn't necessarily mean that you experienced a dramatic, cataclysmic conversion, but rather that you have, even if nurtured in the Christian faith since your physical birth, have received a new

nature through the coming of the Holy Spirit into your life. Your rebirth may not be dramatically evident, but it is as profound as anyone's.

We are born of the Spirit into a life-changing, everlasting relationship with Christ. The Christian life is not about a one-time conversion experience but rather is about a personal love relationship with Christ that keeps on changing your life into his likeness. We live between the two appearances of Christ that John writes about in this third chapter (Stott, 120f). Christ appeared first to take away the power of sin (5) and destroy the devil's stronghold on the fallen world (8). And Christ will appear again to complete our transformation and remove us entirely from the presence of sin (2). In this in-between time we are to abide in Christ, who is preparing us for glory by making us more into his likeness.

True Christians have experienced a spiritual birth and also...

True Christians are exhibiting Christ-like characteristics

John emphasizes the effect of our spiritual birth on our conduct and reminds us that we were given our new nature from God's seed (*sperma*) in us (9). Just as the seed of the husband fertilizes the egg of the wife, creating the conception of a zygote and embryo and then the birth of a child, so the seed of God's Spirit has created our new nature which exhibits Christ-like character traits.

This past week, Nancy and I went to Minneapolis to celebrate the birthdays of our two grandchildren by our son and daughter-in-law. Over the nearly two years of our younger grandson's life, my "purely objective" observation is that this beautiful boy bears a marked resemblance to his paternal grandfather! It may still be somewhat too early to tell, but in time Luke Daniel Roberts in all likelihood will bear a resemblance to one side of the family or other.

And so as re-born followers of Jesus we are to bear a resemblance to him...

Of negative holiness: what we no longer do

Initially at least it may appear that in our text John is contradicting what he wrote earlier in 1:8-2:2, that we do sin and will sin and need to confess our sins regularly, perhaps daily. At first reading, our text seems to call for sinless perfectionism, "enough to drive one to despair" (Davids, 207). But when John speaks in 1:8-2:2 of our inevitable lapses into sin he uses the Greek aorist tense to describe one-time actions; whereas in our text he uses the present tense to describe an habitual continuation of an unbroken pattern of sinful behavior (Smith, 184; Robertson, 221ff).

John is also addressing the claims of two types of Gnostics who were the precursors of the modern New Age Movement—those who claimed they lived above the level of sin and those who said their sin didn't matter since the body was inherently evil and

their souls were securely “saved” (Davids, 208). It’s possible also that John uses the word *anomia* in our text to describe “an utterly despicable transgression” that leads to apostasy (Yarbrough, 182), unlike *hamartia*, sins of failing to live up to God’s calling, which he faithfully forgives. Certainly John is warning against believers’ falling under the influence of the Gnostic false teachers.

But all sin is a possible threat, and Scripture warns us repeatedly to flee from it and to seek continually to overcome its influence in our lives. We all need to watch ourselves and realize the possibility of any one of us falling into its deadly grip

People have asked me about the “unpardonable sin,” always with concern that they might have committed it. I’ve always assured them that the fact that they are concerned is evidence they’ve not committed it. The danger seems to be that habitual sin can produce hardened sinners; thus we all run the risk of becoming unpardonable sinners, incapable of repentance, resistant to grace, and hence ineligible for redemption, blasphemously and finally resistant to the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31f).

John seems to be warning us that we not allow unforgiven, habitual *hamartia* to perilously become *anomia*. So-called habitual “little sins” can lead us into gross sins and to hardness of heart, producing unpardonable sinners who no longer care and who seem beyond redemption.

By the power of the cross of Christ and the new life in the Spirit, the “devil’s work” in our lives (8) has been destroyed. No longer are we condemned to commit the acts of the sinful flesh (Galatians 5:19-21), but are instead empowered to walk by the Spirit who produces his fruit in our lives, which is a description of a Christ-like character (Galatians 5:22f).

True Christians are, in part at least, known by what we no longer do. New converts will likely encounter misunderstanding, criticism and then conflict with old friends who don’t understand or like the fact that these new Christians no longer engage with them in ungodly activities, impure conversations and dirty jokes. But this is because in Christ we are new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17) and are called to live according to our new nature, which stands out before the world like a sore thumb.

Warren Wiersbe tells the story of a converted American Indian who related that he had now “two dogs living in me—a mean dog and a good dog. They always fight,” he continued. “The mean dog wants me to do bad things, and the good dog wants me to do good things. Do you want to know which dog wins?” The one I feed the most” (Wiersbe, 112f).

This is a vivid illustration of Romans 13:14: “Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.”

True Christians exhibit Christ-like characteristics through not just negative holiness, what we don’t do, but also characteristics...

Of positive holiness: what we now do

More even than my three siblings, I bore a striking resemblance to our father, the late Rev. Ray Roberts. In fact, after I reached adulthood, whenever my father's acquaintances would see me for the first time they would invariably ask if I was "Ray's son." I remember one of his friends saying, "You're Ray Roberts thirty years ago!" It was almost impossible for me, at least in places where he was known, to conceal my identity. For that reason I was always proud of my father's good reputation and godly character and was motivated also to honor him by exhibiting a similar type character.

True Christians are aware of our identification with Christ. The word Christian, first given to the believers in Antioch (Acts 11:26) is derived from "Christ's-ones." We are given that name because of a difference from the world (i.e. negative holiness) and also because of our similarity with Christ (positive holiness).

In my tradition, we were taught that holiness consists primarily of what we don't do, i.e. negative holiness. And indeed there are certain sinful acts of the flesh (e.g. sexual immorality, fits of rage, drunkenness) and the spirit (hatred, discord, jealousy, selfish ambition) that we avoid, that we are to consider "put to death" by our faith in and identification with Christ (Galatians 5:19-21).

But my tradition focused on certain social behaviors that strict Baptists regarded as sins—drinking alcohol, dancing, smoking and watching all movies not rated G. And tragically, some evangelicals, our churches and denominations are known to the outside world more for what we are *against* (e.g. abortion, same-sex marriage) than what we are *for*.

Make no mistake about it. I too am against unrestricted abortion and factors that threaten the free practice of all religions. But we evangelicals should be known more for what we are *for*, such as loving and respecting all people, including those with immoral lifestyles, those with different politics, and even our national enemies. Our stated desire should be to see God's Kingdom come on this earth, bringing salvation to the lost, peace to all nations, and even the reclamation of the creation from a being-destroyed environment.

As God's reborn children, we are called to a life of active righteousness, allowing Christ to express his life and love through us as missional Christians. Genuine conversion infiltrates all of our life with the Spirit of God, who calls and causes us to live rightly and righteously. We cannot separate a past conversion experience from our present-day need to walk in step with the Spirit and to join Christ in his redemptive mission of bringing the rule and will of God "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

If we focus only on what we don't do, we're flirting with the danger of being nominal Christians, having a form of godliness, but denying its true, saving and sanctifying

power. In our text John “sounds a somber warning” to the complacent (Boice, 111). But also Paul describes such artificial, nominal “Christians” in sordid terms:

“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people” (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

John addressed the Gnostic false teachers, who thought their sinful, selfish and hateful actions had nothing to do with their salvation (Barker, 331). But John says that our identity and eternal destiny are bound up with a personal, life-changing love relationship with Christ. Tragically, many who claim to be “born-again believers” give little evidence of being true children of God, and thus are “banking” on a false sense of security. As James says, faith without works (“not accompanied by action”) is dead (2:17).

John ends this section with an emphasis on doing what is right, works that demonstrate the character of Christ. He also adds the final reminder of the absolute necessity of love for our brother and sister (10). Likely the apostle/pastor is thinking of the danger of “fomenting judgmentalism” caused by painting all conduct in black and white colors (Yarbrough, 196). We can easily, as we make progress in our spiritual discipline and ethical rectitude, begin to look down on others with a holier-than-thou haughtiness. We need to always remember our debt to grace and our calling to love others, to help the weak, and even to love our enemies. I’m sure John is thinking that even the false teachers, those who have abandoned the true gospel and were living in open immorality, were the enemies that Christ commands us to love (Matthew 5:43-48). Without love, even our acts of faith, noble good works and sacrifice make us a “resounding gong or a clanging symbol” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

To me it’s instructive that Jesus answered the question about receiving eternal life with the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The way we gain assurance of eternal life is to exhibit the character of Christ, demonstrating above all a Christ-like love for our neighbor. This unconditional love for others, and especially our brother and sister in Christ, is essential for our life together in the community of the church, Christ’s body. The practice of this Christ-like love was essential for the churches in Asia Minor that were being threatened by schism caused by false teaching, immoral conduct, and apathetic indifference and even hostility toward one another (Smalley, 181). The essence of the Christian life is summed up by the Great Commandment to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-34; Romans 13:8-10).

True Christians have experienced a supernatural birth from God and also exhibit the characteristics of children of God.

Conclusion:

As the great 19th Century London preacher, Charles H Spurgeon said, “There are no in-betweenites.” Either we are the children of God or we are the children of the devil (361ff).

This is a soul-searching, possibly disturbing yet absolutely critical question to ask ourselves. Regardless of how self-respecting and however highly regarded by others we are, we must search our hearts and let the Spirit and the Word examine us (2 Corinthians 13:5). To be in the grips and strangle-hold of the devil doesn’t mean that we live meanly or are the worst possible person we can be. But apart from the saving grace and rescuing work of Christ and our trust in him, we are within his grip, are part of his kingdom of darkness and being led by his deadly deception to eternal separation from God.

John doesn’t want us and indeed God doesn’t want us to be oblivious to the deception of the devil, who leads us to believe we’re heaven-bound when in fact we belong to him as his children, as really as those who were deceived into bearing children fathered by Dr. Jacobsen (John 8:44). Christ died for us to free us from the Satan’s control and the condemnation and guilt of our sin. And he was raised from the dead to give us the power of a new life and the privilege of rebirth as the children of God.

Why let there be any doubt whose child you are? By grace through repentance (turning) from sin and trusting in Christ you can become a child of God. And his Spirit will make into his likeness day by day. Then, when you see him face to face, you will become perfectly like him (3:2). Regardless of your biological father and whatever your past, you today can start becoming like the heavenly Father because you will receive the “seed” of the Spirit in you. And his Spirit will produce the Christ-like graces that enable you to “confirm your calling and election” (2 Peter 1:10).

Those of us who can assert we are God’s children need to commit ourselves anew to living in step with the Spirit, seeking to be more like Jesus, more like our heavenly Father, doing his work, sharing his love.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. False teachers sought to corrupt the church with their teaching that one could be spiritual and yet continue with sinful behavior, which they claimed did not

affect the soul. What persons or philosophies do you know that also think being saved has nothing to do with our conduct?

2. What does John mean by being born of God (9)? Is a rebirth necessary for all true Christians? Is the rebirth necessarily a dramatic experience or even an event you can remember?
3. Do you agree that everyone is either a child of God or a child of the devil? Why or why not?
4. Do you agree that the Christian life is more a permanent and personal relationship with Christ than it is an experience of faith in Christ? Why or why not?
5. In what way(s) has Christ's appearing (incarnation, death and resurrection) destroyed the devil's work (8)?
6. What are some of the sins (or taboo social behaviors) that we have traditionally identified (and perhaps our parents and Sunday school teachers taught us) as the acts that keep us from being holy? What are the actions that Scripture teaches that we should eliminate for negative holiness and what is the fruit of the Spirit that Paul says we should seek to produce for positive holiness (Galatians 5:19-23)?
7. Why do you think John concludes this section on the marks of a true Christian with the necessity of loving one's brother and sister (10)?

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