

NOW WE ARE CHILDREN OF GOD

1 John 2:28-3:10

Key Verse: 3:2

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

There seem to be many kinds of people in the world. People distinguish between nationalities, tribes, races, religion, social status, economic standing, and so on. But spiritually speaking, as 3:10 indicates, there are only two kinds of people: children of God and children of the devil. Those who are not children of God are children of the devil. No one can be a child of God and a child of the devil at the same time. Children of God are totally different from children of the devil in their nature. Children of God are born of God. Those who are not born of God are by nature children of the devil. Though they are different in nature, it may be difficult to discern between them. It is because children of the devil are expert liars, like their father, who is the father of lies (Jn 8:44). Through their lies, the children of God can be confused and lose confidence in their identity. In our times, there are so many lies and conspiracy theories spread through the media that it is hard to know the truth. This happened in John's time. When some people in the church denied the truth about Jesus and left the fellowship, they spread many lies. John realized that those who remained in Jesus needed confidence that they were children of God, and they needed help to discern who the devil's children were. In today's passage we learn the characteristics of the children of God and the children of the devil, and what blessings we receive as children of God. Furthermore, we learn how we should live as children of God in this confusing time.

First, God's great love (2:28-3:1). Verse 28 is related to the previous passage. When some people denied Jesus' deity and left the fellowship, the remaining believers were confused. John helped them to discern the truth from lies. He said very clearly, “Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist--denying the Father and the Son” (2:22). Then he exhorted them to hold onto gospel truth and remain in Jesus by the help

of the Holy Spirit (2:27). In verse 28, he tells them, “And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.” The word “appears” is repeated six times in this letter (1:2[2]; 2:28; 3:2,5,8). In 1:2, and 3:5,8, it refers to Jesus’ incarnation at his first coming. In 2:28 and 3:2, the word “appears” refers to Jesus’ second coming. While the purpose of his first coming was to save us from our sins, the purpose of his second coming is to judge all people. When Jesus comes again, who can stand before him with confidence, unashamed? No one. Only those who continue in him. To “continue in him” means to keep having fellowship with him, like a vine and branch. This fellowship is with God the Father and Christ the Son. It is full of life, joy, and peace. This fellowship empowers us with confidence and helps us to stand unashamed. It is not because we are righteous, but because he is righteous. Though we are unrighteous, through faith in him, with repentance, his righteousness is imputed to us and enables us to live as righteous children of God. 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Verse 29 tells us the character of the Judge; he is righteous. Jesus is the Righteous Judge. Those who believe in Jesus also do what is right. It is possible because they are born of him. Being “...born of him” means we receive new life and a new nature by the work of the Holy Spirit. As a result, like children have the character of their parents, so we have God’s character. Since Jesus is righteous, we also become righteous. The sure sign of being born again is doing what is right. This does not mean that right behavior is the condition for salvation; rather, it is the fruit of salvation (Tit 2:14).

Being “born of him” means we become the children of God. As John considered the ramifications of this, he was moved by the wondrous love of God. He burst out, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (3:1a). “See” is imperative and calls for direct attention and reflection upon the amazing love God has bestowed upon us. The adjective “what great,” “what kind” (ESV), or “what manner” (KJV), always implies astonishment, and usually admiration. John is stirred with a sense of wonder, awe, and amazement. Originally, the adjective meant “of what country.” The Father’s love is so unearthly--so

foreign to this world--that we may wonder from what country it comes. We cannot understand the magnitude of such love. It astonishes, amazes, and creates wonder within those who properly reflect upon it.¹

God's love is so amazing that he made us his children! We were all like the prodigal son, who was not satisfied with his father's love and was most ungrateful. He took advantage of his father's love to gratify his sinful desires. He squandered his wealth in wild living and ended up feeling that he was starving to death. When he hit rock bottom he realized how generous and great his father's love was. He decided to return to his father with a repentant heart in the hope of being a servant in his household. But when he returned, the father welcomed him with a big celebration feast. The father insisted that a ring be put on his finger and that he be dressed in the best robe as evidence that he was fully restored as a son. In the same way, when we return to God, we hope to be accepted as a servant in his kingdom. But in his lavish love, God makes us his children with full rights and privileges (Jn 1:12). We should be called children of God! And that is what we are! These statements end with exclamation marks. It is totally amazing that we have become children of God. This is only by God's great love, not by our merit, even .00001%. Thank God for his great love lavished on us!

Why is it such a great blessing to become God's children? It means we can have fellowship with him as a child with his father. This fellowship is more than a legal relationship. It is one in which we experience love, joy and peace through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In this relationship we find security, protection, provision and purpose. At the same time he disciplines us to grow in his character so that we may be fit for eternal life in his glorious kingdom. While on earth we receive his holy mission and can serve him without fear, living a meaningful and fruitful life.

Even though we are children of God, the world does not recognize us. This is because the world did not recognize Jesus (1b). So sometimes, in the midst of many troubles and trials of this world, we lose sight of the love of

¹ For reference, see *The New American Commentary* 1,2,3, John. Akin, Daniel L. on Logos Bible Software.

God. Then we become vague about our identity. But let's see the great love God has for us and renew our identity as his beloved children.

Second, hope to be like Jesus (3:2-3). As children of God, we not only enjoy many blessings now, but we have hope for something even greater--the best is yet to come! What is this? Verse 2 says, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." The words "now we are children of God" confirm our identity. We need this confirmation because we sometimes wonder, "Can I really be a child of God? Even though I mess up again and again? Will God cancel my sonship due to my wretched attitudes and behavior?" Don't worry. God never cancels our sonship. No matter what mistakes we make, still we are children of God. Though human beings are fallen, traces of God's image are still visible through a father's heart for his children. Most fathers do not abandon their children in spite of their sins and mistakes. How much more does God, who is the perfect Father, love his children without fail. God's love always protects, always hopes, always trusts, always perseveres (1Co 13:7). The word "now" means this is not just a future promise but a present reality. Let's have confidence that "now we are children of God!"

Though we are children of God, at the present time we have many flaws physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. We get disappointed with our bodies. They get sick or injured, grow old, and don't work properly. We easily get tired. Sometimes we get angry, or anxious, or become sorrowful. We remain self-centered, selfish, bitter and complaining, even though we became grandparents. Growing old is no guarantee of maturity. If we finish our lives in this way, how miserable it would be. But we have hope! What is our hope? John confesses that the exact state and condition of the redeemed in heaven had not been revealed to him. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him. This is unbelievable. But it will surely happen. In eternity, Christians will have glorified bodies that will never get sick, grow old or die. We will be morally without sin, intellectually without falsehood or error, physically without weakness or imperfections, and filled continually with the Holy Spirit. But we will not be omniscient or omnipotent as Christ is. This transformation will enable us to see him as he is. Jesus is so pure, holy,

powerful, radiant, glorious, awesome that no one can see him now, as we cannot look directly at the sun. But when our bodies are transformed, we will see him as he is and have fellowship with him--talking together, eating together, and laughing together. That is amazing.

When Joni Eareckson was 17 years old she had a severe accident that left her paralyzed. Though she identified as a Christian, she did not have real faith. But through the accident, she could meet Jesus truly. She received great comfort and strength when she looked at Jesus, who was hung on a tree, paralyzed and immovable just like her. What really gave her great hope was the resurrection of the body. She said, "I still can hardly believe it. I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness—powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives someone spinal-cord injured like me? Or someone who is cerebral palsied, brain-injured, or who has multiple sclerosis? Imagine the hope this gives someone who is manic-depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts, and minds. Only in the Gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope."²

With this hope, how should we live? Verse 3 says, "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." Though we are children of God, our inner character is not completely changed. We suffer from our sinful desires and are tempted to love the world. But when we have this glorious hope in our hearts, it enables us to pursue Christ and his holiness. We cannot be pure with our own effort. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us from the stain and guilt of sin. But we have our part to play in purifying ourselves through his power.³

Third, discerning God's children from the devil's (3:4-10). In verses 4-10, the word "sin" is repeated ten times. In verses 4-7, John explains the nature of sin. What is sin? Verse 4 says, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness." "Lawlessness" comes from "anomia" in Greek which means to behave with complete disregard for the law and naturally refusing to obey.

² <https://gracequotes.org/author-quote/joni-eareckson-tada/>

³ Stott, John R.W., *The Letters of John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988) p.124.

Human beings are inclined to disobey God's law. Sin is in its very nature lawlessness. Lawlessness is the essence of sin, not the result of sin. Sin is an active rebellion against God's will. Gnostics underestimated sin, thinking that by possessing special knowledge people can overcome sin. But knowledge never helps us to overcome sin. Rather, knowledge puffs up (1Co 8:1). Only Jesus can solve our sin problem through his forgiveness when we confess our sins to him (1:9). This is why Jesus, who has no sin, appeared the first time: to take away our sins (5). Since there is no sin in Jesus, it is obvious that if we live in him we will not sin either. If someone continues to sin, it is the evidence that they have not seen or known Christ (6). Jesus and sin are diametrically opposed to each other. They cannot coexist. After explaining this, John warned, "Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous" (7). The words "do not let anyone lead you astray" are translated in most versions as "let no one deceive you" (NASB, KJV, ESV).

"Let no one deceive you" is the third imperative in this passage, after "continue in him" (2:28) and "see" (3:1). This is not just a suggestion or advice, it is a command to be obeyed. To obey it, is to safeguard our soul. Why did John command this? To be deceived carries a serious result for us. These days many people are deceived by lawlessness. They think that if they remove the law they will be free and they establish zones of lawlessness. The result is not freedom, but bondage to sin, destruction and chaos. When we are deceived by the antichrist, it leads us to most serious consequences: slavery to Satan and eternal condemnation. That is why John strongly warned them, "Let no one deceive you."

We can find two standards of discernment. In 2:22 there is a doctrinal basis: Whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ is a liar. In 3:7b there is a moral basis: "The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous." This is the theme of this passage. It is what a person does which reveals his true nature, not his words. Jesus taught us how to recognize false prophets; it is by their fruits (Mt 7:15-16). People can deceive with their words, but not with their life fruit.

After explaining the nature of sin, now in verses 8-10 John explains the origin of sin. Verse 8a says, "The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning." Sin originated from the devil, who has been sinning from the beginning. The devil is always rebellious toward God--not just once in a while, or from time to time, but always. The word "repent" has no place in his vocabulary and he has no intent to ever repent. Not only does he sin against God, but he also deceives human beings and causes them to sin. The devil never does what is right, but only and always what is evil and wicked. While the characteristic of the work of the devil is to sin, the characteristic of the work of the Son of God is to save from sin and destroy the devil's work (8b).

Verse 9 says, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God." Those who are born of God do not continue to sin and cannot go on sinning. It is impossible for them to continue to sin because their nature has been changed from the devil's child to a child of God. This happens when anyone is born again by the work of the Holy Spirit. They become totally different people. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" "God's seed" refers to the new nature given them by God. The seed metaphor has meaning. When God's seed was planted in our hearts, it began to grow. As God is holy, his seed makes his children grow in holiness. As God is love, his seed produces love in his children which grows to become mature.

As a conclusion, verse 10 simply clarifies how we can discern children of God and children of the devil: "Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister." The children of the devil, by nature, cannot do what is right, nor can they love a brother or sister. On the other hand, the children of God, by nature, do what is right and love their brothers and sisters. Let's remember what great love God has lavished on us that we should be called children of God. Let's have confidence that now we are children of God and we have hope to be like Jesus when he comes again. With this hope let's purify ourselves so that we do what is right and love our brothers and sisters.