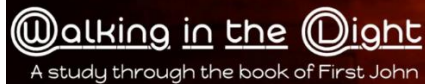


Who Do You Imitate?

1 John 3:4-8

Walking in the Light
A study through the book of First John

Almost 20 years ago, I entered into a battle. It was the battle of my mind, and it was horribly painful. I was struggling immensely with feeling assured of my salvation, and I was trying to find hope in the Word. My basic question was, “How do I know I’m a Christian if I have sin in my life?” I had struggled and battled with sin, and I was open and transparent with people – asking for prayer and help. But I felt as though if I failed then all was lost. Maybe I was even a Christian at all. Then, for some reason, in all my searchings, I went to 1 John, and that only increased my confusion. Chapter 1 was glorious because it said if we confess our sins, he’s faithful and just to forgive. We also discover that if we say we have no sin, we’re liars. Chapter 2 says we have an Advocate when we do sin. But then came chapter 3. And, if you grew up on the King James like me, you’d understand why the confusion would only increase. Verse 6 in the King James is, **“Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.”**¹ Verse 8 is, **“He that committeth sin is of the devil. . .”**²

I’d read commentaries and they’d give various thoughts on these passages. If you held to one theological slant, you’d interpret these verses one way. If you held to another theological slant, you’d interpret other ways. I felt like some saints in previous eras who spoke of their immense struggles with certain passages. I remember hearing of Martin Luther pounding on the door of the Scriptures, waiting for God to answer. That’s what I felt like. But I also sometimes felt like I was losing my mind. By the way, not unimportant to this story is that I was married at the time, too. I’d draw Tracy into conversations on what I was studying and reading, and what other people were saying. I wanted to hear what she had to say, and then she’d tell me her thoughts. But none of that seemed to secure me. I still struggled. Then came a day when Tracy gave me some very sage advice. She said to me that she thought I needed to stop reading 1 John. I was surprised, and I even said to her, “But it’s in the Bible for a reason!” And she responded that there are 65 other books of the Bible that are just as inspired and I should start reading those. Maybe by focusing on others, over time, God would make his truth plain to me. And you know what? She was right.

Twenty years later, I’m preaching through a book that I was once terrified to read, and now I’m entering a text that was one of the scariest of all for me, but it actually holds tremendous encouragement for me instead of dread. But how can this be? Well, as I’ve focused my attention on my relationship with Jesus, I’ve discovered more of John’s point. If you know Jesus, you’ll be progressively changed. I know this is true because this is the promise of God and the experience of believers through the ages – including myself.

¹ [The Holy Bible: King James Version](#), Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 1 Jn 3:6.

² [The Holy Bible: King James Version](#), Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 1 Jn 3:8.

Sadly, some people use these verses to terrify Christians. They'll look at these things and say if you have sins in your life, you may not be saved. They sometimes use the book of John simply as a sterile checklist to ask if you do these things or don't do these things as opposed to seeing John's words communicated on the basis of a relationship with Jesus. And, if you have a relationship with Jesus, these words will serve as a clarion call to grow in godliness. A Christian will heed these words. A non-Christian will ignore or reject these words. But a Christian cannot help but take these words seriously because they have been saved by pure grace and they are loved eternally by God himself!

This is what I've discovered, and I hope that's been true for you as well. As I've been studying 1 John for this series, I've been amazed, blessed, encouraged, and challenged by the apostle John's teaching here. He so practically and lovingly points to our need for fellowship, communion, abiding with our God. Nothing else will do. Only knowing our Triune God will satisfy us – and knowing he loves us and pursues us! Wow.

This is in sharp contrast with the false teachers who simply taught that we needed to know certain truths. But John focuses on relationship. If our relationship with Jesus is firm, then the life will show it. So, last week, we discovered that if we are abiding with Jesus then we will look forward to seeing him again when he returns. And when he returns, we will be like him! In light of this glorious relationship of hope, we will change in our daily living. To boil this down, John showed us how looking to our future hope in relationship with Jesus will affect our present living.

Now, we enter into verses 4 and following of chapter 3 and John here focuses our attention on the past and how the past must affect our present. But he does this for a specific reason. Again, it's to show that our relationship affects our living. So, the main idea of the sermon this morning is: **Those who practice righteousness abide in Jesus. Those who practice sin are of the devil. Are you of Jesus or the devil?**

Remember that this comes in the context of the previous several verses where John is summoning the Christians to ponder and contemplate the unique love God has for them. I say this because this should help those who might feel internal fear about their relationship with God. If you have turned to Jesus, and by his grace you seek him, you are his. You are loved! And so, if you are his, he will also change your life both now and forever in the future. Why? Because of who he is and what he has determined in the past.

With this in mind, let's look at just verse 4 for now. I also want to say that it's going to take a little while until the main idea really shows up. Verses 4-6 set the stage for John's point. So, he's building truths upon themselves until we get to the main idea. As a result, my points today aren't going to be as obvious as in other sermons. We're going to try to walk through the verses in the way I think John intended.

Essential Truth #1: In verse 4, John states, ⁴“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.”³ Notice that verse 4 starts with “everyone who.” This is similar to verse 3 that says that everyone who has the hope of Jesus' return purifies themselves. In verse 6, John says “no one who.” John does not allow for an in-between group of people. Everyone is in one of these categories. You today are in one or the other. You can't squirm your way out into some other group that

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:4.

you think you fit into. No such “other” group exists. Let God’s Word speak and let’s see what verse 4 means.

First, if you read the KJV still, you’ll read it as “Whoever committeth sin. . .” Why does no other English translation say that? Why do they all have some form of “makes a practice of” in their translations? The reason is because John is very purposefully writing in the present tense. The verbiage here, written in the present tense, communicates not only continued, persistent action but also action that is flowing from the very being of the person. That’s what many commentators mean when they will say that John is speaking of “habitual” action. It’s not simply actions done over and over. It’s actions done from core of someone. So, John isn’t saying that if you fight against the same sin for a while, you’re clearly not a Christian because it’s gone on multiple times over and over. The point is that there is a persisting not only in individual sins, but a persisting in *your sinfulness*.

Right here, you might think, “Oh, well then I’m good!” And the reason you think that is because you view “sinfulness” as these overtly awful things that almost anyone would say is bad and wrong. But sinfulness is not only those things that *we* say is sinful. And sinfulness isn’t only outward actions. Sin stems from the heart. And it stems from a heart of lawlessness. That’s what John goes on to say here.

He doesn’t just say that lawlessness comes about when sin happens. He says that lawlessness is at the heart of all sin. There’s an internal defiance against God’s law. You’ve felt it inside of you, haven’t you? Maybe even with things that you thought weren’t that bad. You justified by saying, “I don’t see a problem with it!” But God’s Word clearly speaks about it whether you see a problem with it or not. That’s lawlessness because you try to take place of the Judge and bend the laws. That’s a violation of God’s Law and glory. Sin is lawlessness.

Oh, Ventura, I hope we would understand these words. I pray we would understand the depth of these words. One 20th century theologian named John Stott wrote this of John’s words. I couldn’t have said them better, so I’m going to simply read what he wrote: **today our sins are excused either by euphemisms like ‘personality problems’ or by the plea of cultural relativity. In contrast to such underestimates of sin, John declares that it is not just a negative failure. . . , but essentially an active rebellion against God’s known will. It is important to acknowledge this, because the first step towards holy living is to recognize the true nature and wickedness of sin** (Stott, *The Letters of John*, p. 125). Do you hear this? If you’re sitting here today and you have a heart of lawlessness that you tolerate, you’re in a dangerous position. If you simply say, “Well, I’m forgiven and going to Heaven, God’s just gonna put up with all the ways I don’t want to follow him,” then you must contemplate John’s words: Everyone who makes a practice of sinning practices lawlessness. Do you practice sin? Do you practice lawlessness?

If you’re like one of the false teachers, you might want to object. But John focuses our attention on Jesus has his mission in coming to the world. John goes *back* to encourage us in our present.

Essential Truth #2: Let’s read verse 5 and then the end of verse 8: ⁵You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.⁴ Then verse 8 says, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.”⁵

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:5.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:8.

Twice we see the word “appeared.” In verse 5, John says we know that Jesus appeared to take away sins. Do we know this, Ventura? Isaiah 53 says, “Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt. . .”⁶ Hundreds and hundreds of years before Jesus came to the earth, Isaiah prophesied that the future Messiah will take away sins. The entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament clearly points forward to the need for one great sacrifice to end all sacrifices for sin. Jesus appeared to take away sins! John then goes on to say that in Jesus was no sin. So, our Savior is morally perfect. In him is no lawlessness. Because of who he is, he could both live the perfect life in our place, and he could die the death we deserved and thus take away our sins. This matches what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21: For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.⁷ If you have turned to Jesus for reconciliation with God, his righteousness has been credited to you because your sin was credited to him on the cross! He took the just punishment. We receive the gracious gift of eternal life! Have you turned to Jesus? I pray you have.

John now moves further in verse 8 to refer to Jesus as the Son of God. I believe he does this to emphasize Jesus’ status as the mediator between God and us. Jesus came (past tense) to destroy the works of the devil. What are the devil’s works? Notice, it’s not just a singular thing. The devil has *works*. We saw in chapter 2 that in this world are the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. Jesus speaks of Satan being a liar from the beginning. We know the devil loves to destroy and devour. Anything that breaks apart God’s design and leads to death is of the devil.

Yet, Jesus came to destroy the devil’s works. I love how Paul writes of this in 1 Corinthians 15, when he writes, “⁵⁶The sting of death is sin. . . ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ Jesus conquered death through his resurrection. He conquered sin through his death. This all has happened in the past, correct? Yes! And this can bring tremendous comfort to the problem of verse 4. Sin is lawlessness. If you have spurned the Creator King who is over all and will judge everyone, including you, you are facing a tremendous problem, right? Yes! But Jesus came to destroy the devil’s work – even the work in your life so that you might be forgiven and given life.

Now, John moves forward to show that Jesus’ past mission in coming to this earth must have continuing affects even to the present day. To put another way, the power and affects of his death and resurrection cannot be caged to 30 AD. Now we move forward to see **the consequences of the essential truths**.

If these things are true, then John says in the first part of verse 6, “**No one who abides in him keeps on sinning. . .**”⁹ If you are communing with the Lord, you cannot keep on sinning. You cannot persist in sin that stems from your sinfulness because Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil, which includes your sin and sinfulness. Jesus didn’t simply come to bring you forgiveness and declare you righteous and then to say, “Good luck living in the muck of your sin and problems!” No. He came to destroy the devil’s work even in your life and your own flesh. So, if you abide with Jesus, you cannot keep on sinning. Again, John is emphatic here. He says “no one.” You can’t say, “Well, I know he says ‘no one,’ but he doesn’t mean me.” If you are persisting in sin without change, transparency, confession, growth; and you’re diving further in, you have to question *if* you abide in him.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 53:10.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 5:21.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 15:56–57.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:6.

And if you do not abide in him, do you really know him? This question leads us to the second consequence that John gives in the second part of this verse: **no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.**¹⁰ Here's another "no one" statement. No one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. He doesn't only say abide here. He says you haven't even been affected by Jesus. Now, of course, none of us have physically seen Jesus, but those who genuinely trust Jesus do have the eyes of faith. We know him. We embrace him. We love him! But those who keep on sinning, without concern for their sinfulness, have neither seen or known him. Interestingly, for you linguist buffs, John uses the perfect tense for "seen" and "known." This means that you never have seen or known him and the ramifications come all the way to the present. Your past unbelief is continuing to show.

So, which one are you? Have you seen Jesus, and are you growing in imitating him? Or, are you blind and still in your sins? John will move on now will further emphasis and implications of what he's been saying. I'm going to put his teaching in the form of a question: **Who will you imitate?**

Jesus, the righteous? In verse 7, we read, "Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous."¹¹ Remember that the phrase "little children" is not derogatory. This should remind us of Jesus' words when he says to let the "little children" come to him because the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to people like them! John is giving his readers assurance. They're God's little children. This is the reality for us who believe, too! We are God's little children. What a tender phrase. Then he calls them to not be deceived, which is exactly what the devil wants to do.

The phraseology is important. We can *let ourselves* be deceived. We can be too believing of people, circumstances and information. Someone can slap Bible verses on something and make it sound good and we can think they're a good Christian. Is that true? No! Even Satan quoted Scripture to Jesus. Don't *let yourself* be deceived. Well, how do I not let myself be deceived? Focus on Jesus, and follow him.

John says that whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. The "as he is righteous" actually is the empowerment and motivation for practicing righteousness. Jesus, the Son of God, who came to destroy the works of the devil is righteous. He didn't only come to destroy sin and death in his life. He came to destroy sin and death in the lives of all of those who follow him. That means that you and I are soldiers of Jesus Christ in this world – putting to death sin in all forms in our lives!

Now, let me ask a question. Does God ever fail at any of his missions? No. If Jesus came 2,000 years ago to put an end to sin, will he accomplish it? Yes. Will he accomplish it through you? Yes! So, if you're a person who says, "Well, I know Jesus came to put to death sin on the cross, but that doesn't mean that I am going to be changed," then you missed the point. In Romans 16:20, we read, "**The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.**"¹² In 1 Peter 2:24, we read, "²⁴**He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.**"¹³ Jesus died on the cross so that we would die to sin and live to righteousness.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:6.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:7.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 16:20.

¹³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Pe 2:24.

By the way, “righteousness” is not simply externally moral actions. Righteousness are actions that revolve around God and his standard. Righteousness is only considered righteous when done in dependence on the Lord and for his glory. Apart from faith/dependence, everything is sin. So, don’t try to walk away from today trying to prove your righteousness simply by doing nice things for people. Your actions must stem from your relationship with the Righteous One. If you are connected to the Vine, you as the Branch will bear much fruit! He will see to it. His mission must be accomplished. And you will want to grow because you see who he is and how glorious his love is.

The reason why I posed John’s words in question form of imitation is because you only imitate those you respect or admire or love. Imitation is the highest form of flattery, right? I still remember years ago watching one of my boys (when he was very little) step out of the shower and shake his feet a certain way in coming out of the shower, and it melted my heart then because he obviously saw me shake my feet coming out of the shower. We imitate those we respect or love. Obedience without love is life-draining. It’s bondage. But obedience becomes a joy when you have Savior who loves you and you love him!

By the way, this all ought to be an encouragement to those who may be struggling in the fight against sin, too. You may feel discouraged this morning because that anger came up again or that situation flared or you gave into your laziness. Will this ever get better? If you are in Christ, he will see to it. He is on mission in and through you. Look to Christ again, believe his promises. Gaze on Jesus, follow him and grow in obedience and hope! Will you imitate your Savior? Or, will you imitate

The devil. The beginning of verse 8 says, “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.”¹⁴ It all comes down to who you imitate. Jesus stated that people were of their father the devil, who was a liar from the beginning. Here, John says that the devil is the one we imitate if we continue in practicing sin.

To put another way, if you pick and choose the things you want to believe about God, and you pick and choose the commands to follow, then you can’t say you actually believe Jesus or the Bible. You believe in yourself – which is exactly the same way the devil lives. You imitate your father, who is Satan. I pray that’s none of you here, but if it is, there is hope. John doesn’t write all these things so that we would be stuck in one camp or another. He writes these things so that those who believe in Jesus would become more confident in their assurance. And for those who don’t believe, these words should draw you to turn from your own ways and turn to Jesus who is life and love!

Those who practice righteousness abide in Jesus. Those who practice sin are of the devil. Are you of Jesus or the devil? Now we have both future anticipation that ought to encourage us today, and we have past motivation and promises that empower us to follow the Lord today. He came to destroy the devil’s works even in our lives! Praise his name.

¹⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Jn 3:8.