

ONE OR THE OTHER

by Ray C. Stedman

In this powerful first epistle, the Apostle John follows certain great themes which we have been tracing through the letter together: First, there was the theme of maintaining fellowship with the Son of God; following that, the theme of maintaining truth in a confused and deluded world; and now we are completing the theme of maintaining righteousness amidst a very wicked world. There are two themes to follow these, those of maintaining love, and of maintaining assurance. But today we shall take the final word in the series on Maintaining Righteousness, Verse 10 of Chapter 3. This concludes the section that begins with Verse 29 of Chapter 2.

In this section the apostle has briefly put the whole matter of maintaining righteousness into one verse, Verse 29, Chapter 2:

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that every one who does right is born of him. {1 Jn 2:29 RSV}

He says that the secret of doing right is to possess and experience within yourself the life of the Righteous One. There is only One who is righteous, or who ever has been righteous, the Lord Jesus himself. His life must be lived again in you in order for you to be righteous. There is no other basis. No flabby substitutes, no sleazy imitations, no cocky parodies, no grim copies, no slimy counterfeit, will be accepted. There is only one basis for righteousness and that is to reproduce, in the plan and purpose of God and by means of the Holy Spirit, the life of the Son of God in you. Nothing else than that is righteousness.

Now in the verses that follow (just briefly to recapitulate here), we see the effect of Christ's life in three dimensions: As to the future we are given a hope that purifies us. We look on to an event that is coming, more certain than anything that is happening in our world today, the return again of Jesus Christ. As to the past, we learn that the Son of God came into our hearts to remove lawlessness, the spirit of rejection of authority. That takes care of the past rebellion of our life. And, As to the present, he is come, John says, to deliver us from the works of the devil: from murder, from lying, from destruction, these things that always follow the lawless attitude of the devil.

The way life works is always a mystery to us. We do not even understand the workings of our own bodies. There are strange things going on within us even now that no doctor fully understands. Doctors know a great deal more about our bodies than most of us do, but even they do not know very much. The realm of their ignorance is tremendous, as anyone knows who has been sick for any length of time. The doctor cannot put his finger on what is wrong. Doctors themselves confess that this often is a difficult thing, and that they know very little about the functioning of the human body, compared with what they would like to know.

This is certainly true in areas of function that we often take for granted, as the brain -- this tremendously complicated computer that instantly computes the most amazingly complicated reactions, and is constantly turning out information. Of course, as Dr. Dirks reminds us about computers, "if you put garbage in, you will get garbage out," and so sometimes they fail us. We also have these eyes, these marvelous cameras that are constantly recording events for us. They are much more complicated, much more intricate than any television camera, recording everything in color and three dimensional depth. We are able to reproduce all this also in the eye of the mind through the function of memory, which no

one understands. These things are all vast areas of mystery to us. There is the ear, this amazing microphone which picks up sound more sensitively than this pulpit microphone, or any microphone that has ever been made, and reproduces it so accurately as to expose us to the whole realm of sound in nature. But we do not understand these things. They are mysteries to us. Certain functions we are able to grasp, but the rest remains a mystery. So the mystery of the operation of the life of Jesus Christ in us is filled with enigma and puzzlement.

John says in this very passage, "it does not yet appear what we shall be," {1 Jn 3:2b}. How true that is. I have often thought that was put in there precisely for pastors, to encourage their hearts. Someone comes to me all upset about something, or perhaps they are complaining or griping about something going on in the church, or they are disturbed about what someone has said and their reaction is extremely petty and difficult. After they leave I say to myself, "Well, it does not yet appear what they shall be." What a comfort it is that something positive is happening, even though it is not yet apparent. There are strange conflicts within ourselves, fierce battles which often rage, and may be raging right now, in your heart. You look up at me and look so peaceful -- some almost asleep -- but, for all I know, there may be some fierce conflict going on right now within you. You may be fighting a battle against anger or lust or some other violent feeling that has captured you, and holds you, and is shaking you to the very core of your being. This can all be taking place right here. How mysterious life is. No, "it does not yet appear what we shall be," but one thing is certain, and to this John now brings us: It may not yet appear what we shall be, but it does already appear what we are! The issue is made clear in this closing verse of this section, Verse 10 of Chapter 3:

By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother. {1 Jn 3:10 RSV}

I do not think anything could be put plainer than that. It is crystal clear from this verse that all humanity, in the sight of God, is divided into two classes. Someone has said that people may be divided into two classes, the righteous and the unrighteous; and the classifying is always done by the righteous! Unfortunately, that may be true. Certainly it is true that humanity is divided into two classes -- not three, as we often fondly imagine. We would like to think there are the children of the devil, and the children of God, and then there is a vast group in between who are morally neutral, neither devilish nor angelic. Perhaps, if pressed on the point, most people would classify themselves in the middle somewhere. But God says "No."

Characteristically throughout this letter, John draws the extremes of black and white, but these are not simply his ideas. These reflect the actual situation. Truth is truth and error is error. We have seen this before. John says there is no fellowship between them, no possible blending. There are no gray areas of truth -- it is either white or its opposite, black. There are no shades or degrees of truth. So it is in this matter of mankind -- we either belong to the children of God, or we are children of the devil, one or the other. There are not three classes.

Nor is there one class. There are many today who would have us believe that all men everywhere are, by virtue of their natural birth, children of God. But the Bible never sustains that idea for even a moment. These words of John are the echo of the words of the Lord Jesus himself when he said to certain Pharisees of his day, "You are of your father, the devil, and the works of your father you are going to be doing," {cf, John 8:44}. This is what this phrase, "children of the devil" means. It does not mean that the devil created us, but it means that we reflect the nature and characteristics of the devil. We do so because we are tied, in some remarkably mysterious way, to his life. That is what constitutes someone a child of the devil, or what constitutes another in the opposite direction, a child of God.

Now, all of this is in harmony with the rest of Scripture, with the scriptural view of man. Man, the Bible

says, is a vessel. He does not have power in himself, nor does he have life in himself. He is made to contain life. He is made to hold Someone, designed to contain and express the life of another. In the original intention of God, that life was to be the life of God himself. Man was made for God. That is why, as Augustine put it, we have within us a hunger for God that can never be stilled. Pascal said there is in every man a God-shaped vacuum, which only God can fill. We were made for God.

But according to the record of the Scripture, because of the Fall of man in the Garden, mankind today is no longer containing and expressing the life of God, but is expressing the perverted, twisted life of the devil. It is the life of God, but twisted by the devil. Thus, the life of man as it is manifest today is a twisted life, a perverted life. All of history and current events stands as a contemporary witness to the truth of that fact. That is why life goes on the way it is recorded in our newspapers today.

There is a great deal of misunderstanding which often prevails about this matter of the children of the devil. Perhaps most think of the children of the devil as violent, malicious, openly immoral people; those whom we would ordinarily call wicked people. The Communists, Jimmy Hoffa, and certain others, these are the children of the devil. It is true that the devil expresses his life in violence, in immorality, in lawlessness, defiance, and hostility. People who habitually reflect that attitude unquestionably are the children of the devil, because the Bible tells us the devil goes about "as a roaring lion" {1 Pet 5:8}, expressing himself as a lion does, in violent power. But that is not the only way the devil acts. The Bible also says that the devil is "an angel of light," {2 Cor 11:14}. He can also be suave, cultured, kindly, moral, and respectable, even sweet. It is possible for a life to reflect these characteristics and be equally as devilish as a life given over to open violence. As we have already seen, this but reflects our Lord's own teachings along this line. He said to religious, moral, respected and respectable men of his day, "You are of your father, the devil," {John 8:44}. They were appalled. They said, "What do you mean? We are not born of fornication. Our father is Abraham." He said, "If Abraham were your father, then you would love me and you would hear me. But you are of your father the devil, and the works of your father you will be doing," {cf, John 8:39-47}.

As we view humanity from the Biblical point of view we see that, without exception, every one of us were born into the family of the devil. We were born children of the devil because we are part of the fallen race of Adam. We are children of Adam who sold himself to the devil, and all his children are like him in that respect. The tendency and proclivity toward sin, that twisted perversion, is passed along to us from our forefathers along with the color of our eyes, the eventual height of our bodies and all other physical features. We are born with a bent toward evil. You only need to live with a few babies to see this demonstrated. How utterly self-centered a baby is! There is nothing more self-centered in the world. Everything exists for him, in his thinking. The whole world is there but to serve his particular need, and that, in essence, is the expression of the life of the devil.

It is only by new birth that we become members of the family of God, children of God. That is why Jesus said to that cultured, honored, respected leader of his own day, Nicodemus, who came to him by night, "Except you be born again, you cannot enter into the kingdom of God," {cf, John 3:3 KJV}. All your knowledge, your education, your morality, or your religion is of no value here. Unless you are born again you are still part and parcel of the family and the kingdom of Satan. The whole thrust of the gospel is always in this direction. It is to deliver men from the kingdom of Satan and to bring them into the kingdom of God, into the kingdom of Christ, the Son of his love.

That is what the Church exists for. If we do not declare that message we have no purpose for existing. The Church is not here to correct social conditions, primarily, except as the transference of men and women from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God does correct and change the social conditions of their life. We are here to declare that there is a way out of the human mess, a way out of the troubles, difficulties, bondage and slavery of the kingdom of the devil.

Now there is also much misunderstanding about the phrase, "the children of God." Many people who hear Christians talking this way say, "What hypocrites you are! What do you mean, 'children of God'? What makes you think you're any better than anybody else? Why do you put on such airs, and act as though you are saints and we are sinners?" They seem to feel that if a person says that he is a child of God, that he is thereby claiming to be perfect and without sin. But no thoughtful, Bible-taught, Spirit-taught Christian ever takes that position. To be a child of God does not mean that we are perfect. It does not mean that we have yet learned all that is involved in being a child of God, nor begun to experience it ourselves. What it does mean is that the healing process has begun. God has begun a transforming work, and the evidences of it should be obvious right from the beginning. Not that it is all completed, but it is begun.

As you walk down a street you will often see a building with scaffoldings around it, and looking through the scaffolding you can see that there is no glass in the windows, and obviously things are in a state of incompleteness. A sign out in front says, "The Building Is Under Construction." You would not write an angry letter to the contractor or the architect and say, "What's the matter with you! What do you mean, claiming to be under construction? Why, I walked by there and there's no glass, there is nothing finished about it at all." He would reply, "Why, of course you are right. We never claimed it to be finished, it is simply under construction." So this is what Christians are claiming when they use this phrase, children of God.

Now as we have also seen in this passage, and others, once we become a child of God by faith in Jesus Christ and are really born of God, it is an irreversible process. We cannot be unborn. God, having "begun a good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ," {Phil 1:6 KJV}. Once that wonderful change has taken place, God himself undertakes to bring us along, and he will do his job. We cannot lose this new life. Ah, but there is the rub! This is what John is pointing out. There are many people who sincerely think they are children of God because they have repeated a certain set of words, or prayed a certain prayer, or gone forward in a meeting, or performed some other activity or ritual, when actually they are not and never have been born again. They are self-deceived. What has happened is that the flesh, which is subtle, and, as Jeremiah put it, "irreversibly wicked" {cf, Jer 17:9}, i.e., unspeakably bad, has determined to remain in the seat of power (as it always does), and has simply turned religious or moral; perhaps it has cleaned up a few unsavory aspects of life and thus deceived the heart of the individual so that he thinks he is a Christian because he has done certain things. Now what happens in this case is that such people have been content with a surface change, or with a mere relief of feelings. Perhaps they were greatly distressed about some condition in their life, and someone talked to them about Christ. It looked like a way out, so they said, "Well, yes," they would receive Christ, and they went through the performance of asking him to come into their life. But all they were really looking for was relief from the conditions they were under. They got relief, there was a temporary betterment of the problem, and they thought this was conversion, this was regeneration. But they never came to the place where, absolutely helpless, sensing that they could do nothing in themselves any more, they cast themselves upon the sustaining grace of God. That is what conversion is. It is a feeling of:

"I can't do anything to help myself. There's no improvement that I can bring about. I'm licked. I've got this problem within me, with which I've come face to face, and which I can do nothing to solve."

Then the eye of faith sees the work of Jesus Christ upon the cross as doing for them what they could never do for themselves, and, casting themselves upon the grace of God in helpless, lack of self-trust, they are born again. God's Spirit regenerates them and they move into the kingdom of God. "Well," you say, "how do you know that you've been born again? How can you really tell that this has happened?" This is what Verse 10 is all about. All the apostles tell us this, but no one puts it any clearer than John. In the latter part of the tenth verse he says,

...whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother. {1 Jn 3:10b RSV}

In other words, the unmistakable sign, the "unimitatable" sign, is a two-fold mark. He puts it negatively. If he has not begun to turn from evil, from wrong, and if he has not begun to love his brother, then he is only deceiving himself. As we have just seen in the passage before this, John says that he who is born of God cannot continue to sin {see 1 Jn 3:9a RSV}. He just cannot do it. If you can go on living as you have always lived before you professed belief in Christ, then you have not been born again. You have only experienced a surface psychological reaction that is not the new birth at all. And this is quite possible. John does not say that he who is born of God should not continue to sin, he says he cannot do so, because the life in him says "No" to these things that are wrong, and he cannot go on in them. John will also go on to show us, this life in him will inevitably cause a person to begin to love his brother, to love those around him with a new kind of love. That is the subject of the next theme he will develop and this verse introduces it to us. I shall leave that till we come to it, but here is the two-fold mark: *righteousness*, and *love*, and these two are interwoven, intertwined together. You cannot have the one without the other. As we saw in an earlier message, righteousness is love so behaving as to satisfy justice. Righteousness and love are thus intertwined together.

We will see later on in John that love is righteousness, seeking a way to avoid executing judgment if at all possible, but, if there is no other way, insisting on judgment. That is love. So the true sign of the new life is this dual mark. Rebellion against authority must begin to cease, and hostility and indifference toward others must begin to end.

Now, in all faithfulness, I must tell some of you that you are deceiving yourselves. There are some here, I am convinced, who think they are Christians but who are not Christians, who have never been born again. There are some who have been Christians, you thought, for years, but there has been no change in your attitude toward others. You have held resentments, and have been bitter about certain situations for years, and you have done nothing about them. There has been no upwelling of love within your heart to change your attitude and make you go to another and settle the problem that has been between you. There are some of you who have professed to be Christians, and yet you have been going on consistently, week after week, month after month, year after year, doing things that the Word of God clearly says are wrong. You have covered them up. You have not let anyone know about them, and you think you have hidden them. If this is so, you are fooling yourself. You never have been born again.

We are dealing now with One who knows our hearts. You may fool us, you may fool your friends, and even your wife or husband, but you do not fool God. He knows the heart, and he precisely puts his finger on the situation as it is. He says if these changes are not occurring then you have never been born again. Let me be even more specific:

There has come to my attention recently the rumor that certain people in this congregation are saying, "I know such-and-such is wrong, but I want to do it because everybody else is doing it around me. I think it would be fun, and I want to do it. Because I know God is forgiving and loving, I'm going to do it and then come back and ask for forgiveness afterwards." Specifically, the deed contemplated is premarital sex, and the people involved are primarily young people, although there may be adults who have this attitude about that, or other things equally wrong.

If that is what you are saying, and you are acting on that basis, then let me say with all the authority of the Scripture, there is no clearer sign that you are a child of the devil than that! Despite all your profession, despite all your religious confession, or your experience, if you can say, "I'm going to do this thing that's wrong and depend upon the grace of God to forgive me afterward," you are of the devil; you are not a child of God. The lie of the devil is there.

Listen to it! You can hear echoes of what he said to Eve in the Garden of Eden. "You will not die! God is too loving and forgiving to ever execute that kind of penalty upon you." He had first asked, "Has God said this? Is that the kind of a God you've got? Is he the kind that is so harsh and demanding that he will exclude you from this delightful thing?" Then in utter inconsistency (and the devil is always inconsistent), he immediately reverses himself and says, "Well, after all, you're not going to die. God is too loving. He will never execute this sentence. He is such a gracious, forgiving God, he will never take it out on you." That is the devil's lie. {See Gen 3:1-5} Do you remember, in Romans 6, the Apostle Paul puts this very bluntly. Having reviewed all that God has done in Jesus Christ, he says,

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? {Rom 6:1 RSV}

That is, should we go right on sinning, depending upon God's forgiving grace to take care of the situation? That is a rhetorical question, and there follows it one of the strongest negatives in the Greek New Testament. It is translated by various ways in our versions. In one it is, "By no means!" Another says, "God forbid." Still another says, "May it never be!" But literally what the apostle says is, "It cannot be!" You cannot say that and be a child of God. He goes on to reinforce this by asking,

How can we who died to sin [in Christ] still live in it? {Rom 6:2b RSV}

It simply cannot be. There can be no genuine transference from the power of Satan to the power of the Son of God, if that be the case. You are kidding yourself. How can this thing be? It cannot be. Now you may be tempted to think this. I suppose there is not a Christian among us who has not been tempted at times, under the force and lure of some temptation, to think this. But to act on that basis, to actually do something deliberately, provocatively, challenging God along that line, is absolute proof that the individual is a child of the devil, and has never been born again. Jude takes this up in his letter, a few pages on. In the fourth verse he says,

For admission [to the church] has been secretly gained by some who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly persons... {Jude 1:4a RSV}

To be ungodly does not mean to be wicked or violent, it simply means to disregard God, pay no attention to what he says, go on and act the way you want, regardless of what God says. That is ungodliness.

...ungodly persons who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness... {Jude 1:4b RSV}

Ungodly persons who utilize the forgiving grace and mercy of God to excuse their indulgence in licentious, sensual things:

...and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. {Jude 1:4c RSV}

These Scriptures search us, do they not? They probe right down to the depths of our lives. They do not let us get by with things at all. If someone is thinking this way, then the thing he needs to do, the only thing he can do, is to come as a common sinner, unredeemed as yet, into Jesus Christ; aware at last of the deceitfulness of his heart (that heart which is desperately evil, the prophet says) he must fling himself in helpless reliance upon Jesus Christ, and receive from him the gift of life, and be born again.

I have seen that happen. I have seen young people and older people alike, who thought for years they were Christians and drifted along with a surface manifestation of the Christian life, but within there was rebellion, and deliberate actions of deceit and hypocrisy. But at last God, in grace and faithfulness, made them see what they were doing, that they were merely deceiving their own hearts, and that they had

never been born again. That was the moment of truth. God's grace reached them, and they saw that they were still victims of the deluding power of the devil, still following the course of this world, still walking according to the lusts of the flesh, doing and fulfilling the desires of the heart and the mind, but never yet transferred to the kingdom of the Son of his love.

Are you there? Have you been attending this church for years, perhaps even been raised here as a young person, but you have never been born again? You never really have known what it is to have your inward desires changed. You have tried to get along by fooling people and by deceiving your own heart. We shall pause now, without asking you to do anything outward because what you do before us is of no importance, but we are going to ask you to settle this matter now before God. If you have been living like this, will you do business with him right now? If you have not begun to turn from evil at the core of your being, and begun to love one another, to become warmer and richer and open, more tolerant, more friendly toward others, you have not been born again.

Prayer:

Lord, grant to us five minutes of honesty when we can see ourselves, see our own lives, see where we are heading, see the forces that are gripping us, mastering us, whether they be God or whether they be Satan. There are no alternative choices, Lord. We pray that we may be clear on this matter right now. May the grace of God, fully and freely extended to any hungry heart, be ready to help us confess that we are victims, and make us victors in Jesus Christ. In Christ's name, Amen.

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