

# Righteousness Matters

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Preacher: James Ross

[ 0 : 00 ] So, in this little section, John is helping us to see that righteousness matters, but perhaps we can turn that into a question, perhaps a question many people, at least in society, are asking if they ever think about it.

Is sin really a big deal? I think in this text, John can help us to answer a key question for the Christian faith.

Perhaps we've had that conversation with a friend or a colleague, a family member, a classmate, you know, the kind of conversation that would suggest that the idea of sin is outdated, sounds kind of primitive and restrictive.

You know, why is the church always talking about it? Why bother with it? We live, of course, in a culture that encourages personal freedom.

It's my body, it's my choice. And when many people look at Christianity today, their instinct is to think that we are on the wrong side of social issues, and so perhaps we have very little to say about what is right and what is wrong.

[ 1 : 18 ] sin a big deal in our day and age. How does it come up in Christian circles? Again, maybe you've had some of these conversations or you've heard them being spoken about.

You know, if a person is saved by God's grace, does it really matter how we live? Have we ever heard obedience being spoken about negatively? That sounds an awful lot like legalism, whereas the God of the Bible is all about love and grace.

Many churches, many churches, many Christians have been tempted and have given way and have redefined sin for our generation in a bid to try and make the message of the Bible more acceptable.

And that's why I think John's text is really helpful.

And just to point out that right in the middle is where we see this coming out. Verse 7, right in the middle of our text, Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray.

[ 2 : 22 ] So there is a temptation here. There is pressure coming, and we know that it's coming from false teachers who we've met throughout the letters so far. And John responds to the temptation by saying, The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

Jesus Christ is the righteous one. To belong to him is to live a life of righteousness. But the false teachers are saying something quite different. They're saying what we do in our body, that's no big deal.

We're all about the Spirit. We're all about higher knowledge. So the humdrum of what we do day in, day out is no big deal. You can be righteous before God without living a righteous life.

That's the claim that John is tackling here. And as we have seen John do so many times in this letter, he's going to do some fact-checking.

Is this in fact accurate? Is it possible to say, I have been saved by grace, that I can be righteous without in any way pursuing righteousness?

[ 3 : 30 ] And John's going to tell us, actually, no. That's a dangerous lie from these false teachers. And he's going to make clear to us in lots of different ways that righteousness in our lives does matter, that sin truly is a big deal.

And to help to make his point, there's a repeating pattern within our text. In a sense, he gives us three ways to approach the question.

So we can think about John asking the question, what is sin? There in verse 4, but also in verse 8. He helps the church to think about why did Jesus come in relation to sin in verse 5 and verse 8.

And then he helps Christians to ask the question, what family are we a part of? In verse 6 and then at the bottom in verses 9 and 10. So we're going to look at those questions and see that repeating

pattern.

And as we do, we will see that because Jesus came to defeat and destroy sin in the lives of his people, righteousness matters.

[ 4 : 39 ] And that God's family are both called and empowered to reflect his righteousness in our lives. But let's begin with this first question, what is sin?

And John gives us one of the key New Testament definitions here in verse 4. Everyone who sins breaks the law. In fact, sin is lawlessness.

Sin is to be anti-law. And of course, the law in view here is the law of God. So John, in line with the Bible teaching, understands that God gives his law.

That law is summarized in the Ten Commandments. That law is then summarized by Jesus. Love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. And God's law is a reflection of his character and his will.

So it is unchanging and it is good. But sin is lawlessness, which means people in sin rebel against that law.

[ 5 : 52 ] That if God is the king and says, do this, sin is when we would seek to overthrow God's government, God's rule over us. And when we do that, we're rejecting both the goodness of God's law and there is a rejection of the lawgiver himself.

We're going against the grain of the universe. We're going against the grain of how we were made. We were made to live under law and to experience freedom and joy within the proper limits that God sets.

That was life in the garden. We're going against the grain of the earth.

It's also there whenever in a moment we find ourselves in a situation and we're reflecting and we can say, well, I can choose to obey.

And maybe life will get a little bit more hard and uncomfortable for me. Or I will choose to go another way. Then the lawlessness of sin is being shown in our own lives.

[ 7 : 20 ] We're made to live under God's law. But sin is lawlessness. And so every day and throughout the day, you and I will find ourselves choosing, am I going to reflect God the Father's will in this place, in this conversation, in this situation?

Or am I going to reject His will in this place, in this situation? What is sin? Sin is lawlessness.

But that's not the only description of sin that John provides. We can go down to verse 8. The one who does what is sinful is of the devil.

Because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. So sin is devilish. And John, again, is explaining to us the devil is the arch sinner.

He is the great sinner. In fact, if you were to ask the question, where did sin and rebellion come from? You know, the only answer that we get in the Bible is the devil.

[ 8 : 27 ] That there is anti-law in heaven. That Satan, the devil, persuaded some angels to rebel against the rule of God the King.

He wanted worship and glory for himself. With the result that he has been cast out. But he is still intent on destruction and opposing God.

And so his strategy? Well, let me drag people to an anti-law way of thinking. So that people would rebel against the God who made them.

So that people would rob God of glory and seek glory for ourselves. And imagine that that brings freedom and that brings fulfillment. I don't know if anybody's read Milton's Paradise Lost.

A very poetic, extended reflection on the strategy of the devil. And John is saying really clearly that choosing the way of sin and saying that sin is a minimal issue and it's no big deal is choosing the way of the devil.

[ 9 : 38 ] And that's to face the same outcome. That just as the devil is cast out from God's presence, so we will find ourselves if we continue in habitual sin without repenting of it.

And so John knows how important it is to help the church in his day and how important it is for us in our day to understand that what we do with our body is very important and it's very important to God.

That our obedience and our righteousness really does matter. That our talk about sin is not extreme and old school and primitive. We need to let John, we need to let God's Word instruct us that sin is to be an active rebellion against God and His Word.

It's to place ourselves in the same camp as the devil. And so perhaps the next time that we are tempted and we wonder to ourselves, well, does it really matter? We can let John's warnings ring in our ears. Sin is a big deal. That it would serve as a fire alarm making us run to safety. To see that the devil would have us to turn our back on God and reject His ways.

[ 11 : 02 ] But it's dangerous. Because sin is lawlessness. Moving from there, but very much connected in John's logic, is the question, why did Jesus come?

So here's a second way into this question, does righteousness matter, is sin a big deal? And it's all about understanding the person and work of Jesus. Because actually this is crucial to giving a good answer, does sin matter?

Perhaps we've noticed that one of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, they write biographies of Jesus. And one of the unique aspects of the Gospels is that while they give almost no attention at all to Jesus' early years, you know, most modern biographies that we read will have extended things about where they were born and their school years and those kind of things. And even the emphasis doesn't fall principally on the great achievements of Jesus' life, which are many. Most attention is given to Jesus' death.

That's unique in the way biographies are written. And it's really interesting as well to understand that Jesus himself lives his life anticipating his death.

[ 12 : 28 ] He lives under the shadow of the cross. And we know this as early as John chapter 2. So the very first miracle that Jesus performs, turning water into wine at the wedding of Cana, there is a point where he turns to his mother and says, my hour has not yet come.

And that phrase, my hour, repeats throughout John's Gospel in the lips of Jesus, referring to the time of his suffering, his death, and then his resurrection.

And so right at the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus is anticipating the climax, his death on the cross. The goal of his life is his sacrificial death.

And I think that's really helpful. If we happen to have the privilege of reading the Gospel with a friend, with a family member, with a colleague, one thing that we want them to discover is that, that Jesus is so much more than a wise teacher and a miracle worker, though of course he is those. He is the Son of God who came to save by his self-giving love. And John here wants to show us really clearly why Jesus came.

[ 13 : 42 ] He actually uses the appear language for those of you who were here last week. We thought about that language in the context of his second coming, the time when he returns.

So just to go back, 1 John 2, 28, And now, dear children, continue in him so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed, anticipating his return.

But this time, John will use the language of appearing with the focus on Jesus revealing his glory in his earthly life and his ministry and especially his work on the cross as he goes to war on sin.

So verse 5, we find it there the first time, But you know that he appeared, appearing with a display of glory, so that he might take away our sins.

And in him is no sin. So Jesus is the sinless one, the only sinless person who ever lived, the eternal Son of God.

[ 14 : 45 ] And he has come to take away our sins. Just as in the Old Testament there were those animal sacrifices provided to take away sins, anticipating this still greater sacrifice.

Jesus is a far greater sacrifice than those animals. He is perfect. He has a sinless will. He gives himself to die for his people.

Jesus is the only one who can truly say, To do your will, I take delight. Every point in his life, including at his death. Jesus appeared so that he might take away our sins.

He dies in the place of sinners. He takes our rebellion. He dies for our rebel will.

And he gives forgiveness. He gives his righteousness. So that when we come to him and we trust in him, our debt is cancelled and our spiritual account now reads that we are spiritual billionaires.

[ 15 : 57 ] Loved like Jesus is loved. So Jesus appeared to take away our sins. And then down in verse 8, we hear the same language, reappear.

Second part of verse 8, the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. And so this in a sense connects us with Daniel 7.

If you were here this morning and this idea of this battle, spiritual battle that rages through all creation and through all history, the battle between good and evil, the theme of so many of our

great stories, is the theme of the apocalyptic writing.

And it's the theme for John here. And it's important, and we saw this this morning, to recognize in this spiritual battle, as Jesus comes to destroy the devil's work, it's not a battle between equals. Not even close. God alone is on the throne. God sets limits for the devil. God is the judge. That the victory of God and of good is never in doubt.

[ 17 : 05 ] And what becomes clear in John's presentation is that there is a crucial moment in the battle within history connected to the appearing of Christ.

Connected to His mission at the cross. That Jesus, as He goes to the cross, destroys the work of the devil. And it's interesting that that word, it can be used to speak of something being untied and set free.

So you can think of an animal untied and set free. But it's so resonant for us. As Jesus dies and pays the penalty for our sin, it's like our sin burden has been untied.

We are set free, no longer slaves to sin, when we are trusting in Him. But that language of destroy is also used of the tearing down and destroying of buildings and of kingdoms.

And it reminds us that in Jesus' death on the cross, the kingdom of darkness is conquered. We heard it in Hebrews chapter 2, verses 14 and 15, where the author there reminds us that the Son of God became truly human in order to die for us, and in dying for us, breaking the devil's power.

[ 18 : 30 ] Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity, so that by his death, he might break the power of him who holds the power of death, that is the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

When Jesus dies on the cross, the devil's power is broken. For the people of God, we no longer need to live with a fear of death and condemnation, that it is a rescue out of the kingdom of darkness and we're brought into God's kingdom.

So when we're discussing, you know, why does the Bible, why does the church make a big deal about sin? Isn't that so old school? Or when perhaps we find ourselves tempted to ignore, to reject, to minimize God's will, John will say to us, here's what to do in that moment.

Go to the cross of Christ. Understand that it took nothing less than the eternal Son of God suffering and dying in our place to break the power of sin in our lives.

If sin didn't matter, why in the world would the Father send His Son to go through all that He did?

Why would Jesus embrace a life of betrayal and rejection and humiliation and suffering and death?

[ 20 : 13 ] But God knows, and Jesus knew, this is the only way to save a people for Himself. And in love, He did it. And so we know that sin matters because Jesus came to wage war and to win that war, to offer grace and forgiveness and life to all who will trust in Him.

And that takes us to our third question, our third way into the larger question, is sin a big deal? Does righteousness matter?

And it's the question, what family are we part of? So John returns to this theme a few different times in this letter, drawing on the fact that just as in human families there is a family likeness, you know, sometimes that's in terms of our appearance, sometimes that's in terms of character traits, and He says, so it should be in the family of God that children should be like their Father, that we should be like Jesus our Savior.

So last time, John was talking about Jesus as the righteous one and the pure one. And John continues that language of righteousness and belonging to the righteous one to remind us that those who belong to the righteous Lord Jesus should share that character, will share that character. And again, this isn't perfectly, John is very honest about that. In fact, John will say in chapter one that if we say we have no sin, we're calling God a liar and the truth is not in us.

[ 22 : 02 ] But by God's grace, that righteousness within the people of God is real and it will be growing. And so John wants to say there is this test of righteousness that can be applied and it can be applied to the believer to give us assurance assurance that we belong to God.

And we begin to notice that, you know, John loves these contrasts, light and darkness. And now he's drawing this contrast between those who belong to God and those who don't.

And he's been doing it all the way along. By the time we get to chapter three verses nine to ten, we really get to the climax of his thinking. So just read those verses again.

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.

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 God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister. [ 23 : 14 ] So he presents a picture of two families, two families who could not be more different, either side of the tracks.

And as the Bible will make clear, we are all part of one family or the other. And John says to the believer, you can apply the test of righteousness to find assurance that you belong, that lifestyle is one way to show which family we are a part of.

So he's been developing this as he's gone along. So in chapter 2 and verse 29, he talks about those who are righteous, everyone who does what is right has been born of him, versus chapter 3, verses 4 and 5, everyone who sins breaks the law.

So there are those who pursue a life of righteousness and there are those who pursue a practice of sinning. That's distinct. Chapter 3, verse 6, there are those who live in Christ and there are those who because they continue in sin have not seen him and do not know him.

Chapter 3, verse 7, there are those who do what is right, following the one who has saved them, the righteous one. Chapter 3, verse 8, by contrast, there are those who do what is sinful.

[ 24 : 46 ] Chapter 3, verse 9, there are those who do not continue in sin, but then there are those who do. And we see it because they do not love God's will and they do not love God's people.

They do not love the church. And so as John develops this contrast, what does he want to say to the church, to the believer?

He wants to encourage us, I think, to reflect our father in our lifestyle. And again, this is a familiar idea when we think about our own families. As parents, perhaps we remember as children, that talk, you know our family values.

Let's see you live them out. Sometimes a sibling may be called in, for example, look at your elder brother. Why not follow his example?

It may not always work so well depending on our situation, but that's what God does. God, our Father, says, listen, in my family, we do righteousness.

[ 25 : 59 ] You're my child. Pursue righteousness. Christ, my son, your elder brother that are in the faith, he is the righteous one.

Follow his example. Because as Christians, we have this wonderful privilege of bearing the image of God, the image of Christ in our lives.

As we have been saved by grace, as we've been set free from our sinful loves to now love God, we're being restored into the image of God.

Our love for God is growing. And one reason why sin matters should always matter to us is because we don't want our Father to look bad.

We don't want his name to be dragged through the mud. Because we, as his representatives on the earth, are living in deliberate sin. So by God's grace, we choose obedience for the sake of making Jesus known, for making him seem like good news, for giving glory to God as we pursue his will.

[ 27 : 15 ] God's grace. And related to that, and this is especially in verses 9 and 10, John says to the Christian, be who you truly are.

What does he say to those who are saved by grace? What does he say is true of us? He says in verse 9, we are born of God.

He says God's seed remains in his children. That reality of spiritual life that leads to growth is in his children.

And that means that we have a new power, both to say no to sin and to say yes to righteousness. And so we cannot go on sinning because this new life in us is telling us that righteousness is better by far.

And again, of course, John is not saying that we can expect perfection in this life that waits until we are with the Lord himself. But it does mean we don't want to sit comfortably with sin.

[ 28 : 31 ] We don't want to settle and say, well, that's just who I am. We don't want to settle for half-hearted commitment to pursuing God's way, God's will, holiness.

And so we need to expect that God's going to speak to us and going to remind us. Just as happens in a family or perhaps we find ourselves in a new company or we get promoted with a different team and sometimes we'll get those reminders.

That's not how we do things here. There will be mistakes. But there will be growing righteousness because that seed of life has been planted in us.

Because as a child of God we've been given a love for him and given a new heart and that leads to new loves. So at the end of verse 10, anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.

To turn that on its head and to make it positive, anyone who does what is right is God's child. Those who love their brothers and sisters, that's evidence of belonging in the family of God.

[ 29 : 45 ] Now we love God's love, not in a legalistic way, well if I work really hard then perhaps God will accept me. No, we know we're accepted by grace and gratefully we respond. And part of that response is love for our spiritual family.

We share the same DNA. We're bound together by the Spirit in Christ and so there is a new love. It's in a big deal.

Does righteous living matter? In these few verses John gives us a very clear yes in these three different ways, reminding us that sin stands in opposition to God, who in Christ has come to love and to save.

He puts it in terms of the work of Christ. He came specifically to wage war, to win the victory over sin and without that reality, without the gospel, we would be slaves to sin.

We'd be heading for the same judgment as the devil himself. And John reminds us the Father by His grace places His life in His children, adopting us by His grace.

[ 31 : 09 ] And as David Jackman so helpfully puts it, sin is inconsistent with sonship. So we're invited to take sin seriously, we're invited to gratefully receive the work of Christ, and we're invited to live our days as God's children, gladly pursuing righteousness as we've been saved by the righteous one.

whoever