

Focus on Love

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[0 : 00] We're basically looking at chapter 3 tonight, but of course these chapters aren't in the original. The letters are not carefully divided up into chapters.

Continuous argument.

So let us remember why John wrote his letter and he told us that. He said, I'm writing these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life. Well that's certainly a thing worth knowing about, isn't it? So he wants us to know that and he wants to tell us how to live consistently with this knowledge. But remember he also gives a warning in chapter 2 verse 26.

I'm writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. There are things that may be told as we were singing earlier, the devil's lies, which will try and head us off in a different direction.

[1 : 18] I don't know whether this is going to work, but we'll try. No, never mind. Do it with a keyboard. Come on, wake up. Ah.

Oh dear, sorry about that. What's happened? Ah. What's happened there? That's better. Right. Yeah. Now, one thing that John does do in his letter is give these, what we might call the three tests of true Christianity.

Tests of obedience, of doctrinal truth and of love. And when I was preparing this series of talks, I read chapter 3 and thought, oh, that's about love.

And so we'll call this focus on love. Well, there certainly is a lot about love in this chapter. But the more I thought about it, the more I think, in this chapter particularly, these three themes are totally plaited together and woven together.

It's almost impossible to separate them out. And so the chapter begins and ends with love. But in the center, we have this great exhortation to avoid sin. So I've tried to get a handle on this chapter.

[2 : 40] And you remember in the previous section, John has discussed the implications of the anointing of the Holy Spirit. And in this chapter, he sort of develops that idea of those being born of the Spirit into the family of God, with all that implies.

If we claim to be children of God, whose family likeness is it that we display? And how does this impact on that, on his overall theme of knowing that we have eternal life?

So I'm sorry about the small print, but the only way to really to understand a tapestry is to follow the individual colors.

So I've tried to get the overall structure of this and give you some indication of it. If you're listening on the recording, you might want to download the slides, otherwise it won't make too much sense. So I've tried to color it for you. And the chapter comes basically into these three sections, which each start off basically the same way.

[3 : 47] They start by talking about confidence in God. So we see that in chapter 2, verse 28, for instance, that we may be confident and unashamed before him.

And that occurs two more times. How are we to be confident? Well, we're to be confident because we're the children of God. And again, this idea of the children of God occurs in each section, but with a slightly different slant on it each time.

And the first two sections go on to talk about the contrasting family lifestyles of the children of God or the children of the devil or the children of lawlessness.

And so those are the basic. The last section is a kind of summary, a conclusion. I don't have to write my own conclusion to this sermon because John puts one in. This one is a conclusion.

But there are all sorts of other themes going on through this as well. One is certainly that of love. So I've colored that in blue. There, there, there, there.

[5 : 05] This theme of love pops up all the time. The love of God and how we should love one another. And there is also this thing going on about Jesus appearing.

I was beginning to run out of colors, so I've colored that in magenta. In this outer structure, we see twice that Jesus appears or will appear in the future.

2.28 and then in chapter 3, verse 2. 2. But there's also talk as we get into it of where he has appeared already. So all these themes are woven together into this tapestry.

And I think we need to try and keep on, try and see it in those, in those sections and try and get a handle on what John is actually saying here.

So do try and keep in mind this overall structure. We are confident in God because we are children of God. And then what does that mean? How should we live as children of God?

[6 : 11] And say, he does it in those three sections. So what I'm going to do, I have to go back. I'm going to look at these two contrasting family lifestyles, the two sections on that, as illustrations of how we are supposed to live as children of God, as children of love.

And then we will just look at the concluding section as the conclusion to the sermon. So the first of these sections on the contrasting family lifestyles, we find in chapter 3, verses 3 to 9.

So if you'd like to just look at that. I think I will read it out, actually.

Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. Everyone who sins breaks the law. In fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he may take away our sins.

And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray.

[7 : 33] He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him. He cannot go on sinning, because he has 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 a child of God, nor is anyone who does not love his brother. So, verse 10 actually, this section finishes.

So let's look at these contrasting family lifestyles. First of all then, this one of... Sorry, I'm missing a page here.

Yeah, sorry. This one of the Son of God appearing to take away sins, and therefore, if we are living as God's children, we should live as if he is the elder brother, as we are united with him, and so he appeared to take away our sins.

[8 : 55] You would have noticed that it's, again, a repetition. So, the way it works, first of all, there's a call to purity in verse 3. In verse 2, it says, when he appears, we shall be like him, and if we have this hope, we purify himself, just as he is pure.

So there's that call to purity. And then he says, everyone who sins breaks the law. In fact, sin is lawlessness. And that's the first of the repetitions.

And then there's a slight change later on, when he says, he who does what is sinful, in verse 8, is of the devil. Now, perhaps I should say, before we dive into this, that this passage has proved quite controversial in the past, because a literal translation of some of those passages might be that those born of God cannot sin.

For instance, the authorised version says that. And that sometimes caused confusion and outward error in the past. But that would certainly contradict chapter 1, verse 8, for instance, where John says, if we have no, say we have no sin, we make God a liar.

And many other passages of scripture. So the modern translations, and this even includes the ESV, which is fairly literal in its translation, are surely right in reading the present tense here to mean that Christians do not continue in the state of sin.

[10 : 30] Indeed, they cannot. John Stett says that if he meant Christians were incapable of sinning, he would have used the aoris tense, which of course we don't have in English. But the use of the present tense here indicates that Christians cannot continue to live in a state of sin.

So I think we need to read it that way, as the modern translations do indeed put it. So what does John say? Sin, says John, is lawlessness.

In other words, it's to disobey the family rules. It's not that obedience makes you a family member, but certainly disobedience is evidence that we're not true members.

And we read that Jesus appeared, in this case the past tense, to take away our sins, and in him is no sin. And so no one who lives in him can keep on sinning.

No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. So the firstborn son, Jesus the firstborn son, is without sin. And so if we declare a truce with the remaining sin in our lives, we're denying that family resemblance, aren't we?

[11 : 43] And saying we don't really want to be part of God's family at all. We can't be complacent about the family rules, the Ten Commandments, and the command to love God with all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And it's precisely because we fail that we need constantly to be in an active process of purifying ourselves. As he says in verse 3, I'm sure he doesn't mean you just do this once.

The priest, of course, had to purify himself every time he went in to make the sacrifice. And I'm sure that's what John has in mind here. We have to be constantly purifying ourselves.

I say because we fail, we need to be always in an active process of purifying ourselves. And the trueborn son or daughter, the true member of a family, wants to live up to the family ideals and delights to do that, even when it's a struggle.

So sometimes it might be a struggle for a son or daughter to keep the family rules, but ultimately, because they're part of the family, they want to do that. And so even when it's a struggle, we delight to live up to the ideals the family lives by.

[13 : 03] And the ideal that the family of God lives by is the ideal of the son without sin. And so he says, Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray.

He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. And so I'm sure he doesn't mean that we never sin, but rather we aim to do what is right.

We aim to be righteous because Jesus is righteous. We aim to copy the firstborn son, the sibling, as it were, who we look up to. And if we lack that family resemblance, then most likely we're not true family members at all, as it says in verse 9.

And in fact, we are probably part of the devil's family. His family is marked by continuing in sin, isn't it? And so John takes a slightly different tack in verse 8.

He reminds us that he who does what is sinful, instead of saying sin is lawlessness, he said he who does what is sinful is of the devil. And so if we're in the devil's family, instead of emulating the son who is without sin, we emulate the devil who has been sinning from the beginning.

[14 : 36] So he reminds us again that the reason the son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. And no one who is born of God will continue to sin.

Why not? Because God's seed remains in him. In other words, he has been born into the family of God and so cannot go on living as if he is part of the devil's family.

This is how we know who the children of God are and who are the children of the devil are. Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God, nor is anyone who does not love his brother. And so John then goes to introduce another characteristic of the family of God, of the contrasting family lifestyles.

And this is in verse 11 onwards. He starts with the command to love. He says everyone should love his brother. This is the message you heard from the beginning.

[15 : 36] We should love one another. Now clearly this is not the whole message that they were taught. But it is the part John now wants us to focus on.

And here having talked about children of the devil and children of God, he contrasts the devil's family, doesn't he, with that of God. In verse 10 and verse 12, in verse 10, he talks about being the children of the God and the children of the devil.

And again in verse 12, he says, don't be part like the devil's family. If we are true family members, then we should love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The members of a family should love. One another. And so he contrasts the way the devil's family works and the way that God's family works.

And the devil's family follows the example of Cain. Verse 12, he murdered his brother. That was hate, inaction, jealousy, division, murder and death.

[16 : 55] But contrast that with the example of Christ, who instead of murdering his brother, laid down his own life for his brothers. Verse 16.

And so love inaction is about self-sacrifice and pity and action and truth. So the devil's family is always dysfunctional.

It's always marked by jealousy and hate and violence. And of course, such families do exist, don't they? We read of them in the news from time to time.

And when we do, we're very rightly shocked. How can a mother not care for the child that she's in her family, that she bore?

How can a father, who is responsibility for a child, not care for that child, but instead mistreat them?

How can a son or a daughter rise up and murder their parents, as has happened?

[18:00] How can they fight and try and disinherit each other? When we read of such families, we're shocked, and rightly so. Because the true family should love each other.

And so the very place where a wife or a husband or a child or a grandparent should feel safe is instead a place of fear and danger. And so Cain is the elder brother of this kind of family.

And this kind of family displays his likeness. And the family of the devil, ultimately, is always like that. But look by contrast at how God's family works.

It's marked, isn't it, by care and concern. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth. So just as God's love was not marked just by, well, there are a nice lot down there.

[19:12] Not just a matter of words, but rather he sent his son. For God so loved the world that he sent his son, that whoever believes should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Just as the son came and laid down his life for his brothers and sisters, so the family of God is marked by that active love, that love that actually does things, that cares in an active way for one another.

If we don't share in the community spirit, then really we're not part of the community. We're not really members of the community.

And so we do need to focus on loving each other, loving one another, and that love then can spill out into the world. Now what the world makes of that might be difficult to say.

John reminds us that sometimes the world might be jealous and hate us, but let's not give them reason for that. Let's love one another and let that love spill out into the world around.

[20:28] And if that happens, then the world has no grounds for that jealousy, although it might still hold to it. So whose family likeness do we bear?

Do we bear the family likeness of the devil who sinned from the beginning? Or do we bear the family likeness of Christ who came to take away our sins?

Do we bear the family likeness of Cain who was jealous of his brother and murdered him? Or do we bear the family likeness of Jesus who came to lay down his life for his brothers and sisters?

So whose family likeness do we display? If we truly display the likeness of God's family, the signs that we're in God's family, then we may indeed have confidence in God.

And that's how John finishes off here with his conclusion. So I say I don't need to write a conclusion to this sermon because John provides one in those last three verses, 19 to 21.

[21:42] Let's read it. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us.

I'll read on to the end.

And receive from him anything we ask because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command, to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

Those who obey his commands live in him and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us. We know it by the Spirit he gave us. So he comes back to where he started.

We're saying the Spirit living in us is evidence that we are in God's family. So why is John saying these things? He's certainly not saying them to scare us.

[22:43] We could take it that way, couldn't we? We could think, oh dear, I can never match up to that standard. But actually that's not what John is trying to say at all.

Remember he says, God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God. Our hearts might condemn us sometimes.

We might realize we've sinned, we've done something wrong. And our hearts will say, well, are you really part of God's family? But God looks deeper than that, doesn't he? He looks down to our inmost motivations.

And so that's where we should look and say, are we really, have we really made a truce with the devil, with lawlessness? Or do we really want to not continue in sin, but to live righteously as he is righteous?

And if God sees that motivation in our hearts, which is put there by his Holy Spirit, then he takes that for the action. And so then our hearts do not condemn us because we have confidence in God. [23 : 56] And so examine your conscience. Are you truly seeking to love God with all your heart, even though you often fail? Do you honestly seek the good of your neighbors, particularly those of God's family?

Our hearts might be unsettled, but God knows better. He sees through the immediate failure, to the intent belief beneath. And so he invites us to approach him in prayer, doesn't he, in verse 22.

Sorry, verse 21. Yeah, 22. We have confidence before God to receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.

And again, I don't think he means here, because we always obey his commands. Surely, perhaps he's saying, rather, that we have confidence to God, because we are praying that we can obey his commands, that we won't make truce with the devil, that we really will pray that we might do better next time, and that we will not continue in sin.

So having done the necessary examination, our heart should give us a clean bit of health. And then we can go back to everyday life with confidence that we're not harboring some deadly spiritual cancer, but instead we are truly living by the spirit he gave us.

[25 : 19] So John doesn't say these things to, say to frighten us, to scare us, think that, oh gosh, we do sin, so are we really continuing in lawlessness rather than continuing in sin?

But he's not saying that to that, he's saying, look at our motivations. Do we really want to be holy? Do we really want to live as God's people?

Even if occasionally we say a cruel word or a thoughtless word, do we really love our brothers and sisters in Christ? And if we do, then we can be confident that the spirit lives in us and that we live in him through that spirit.

And so we can know that we have eternal life. So I'll stop there. We've got a fair bit of time. I thought it might perhaps, if anybody wants to say anything, but it might be worth asking if people have any thoughts on this, what it means about not continually or continuing in sin.

Look at verse, where is it? Verse six, for instance, no one who believes in him keeps on sinning. No one who ever continues to sin has either seen him or known him. What does that mean in experience?

[26 : 40] Do people have some testimony or comment that they might make? I haven't actually got the radio mic on, but never mind.

Perhaps I can repeat it if anybody does anything. I don't think, I assume nobody is going to claim that it does mean we never sin.

Apparently not. Okay. Well, let's examine our consciences and make sure that we haven't made a truce, that we are really aiming to be holy and to love the brethren.

But then let's have confidence indeed, because that's what John tells us we should have. He wants us to have confidence in God, that we are his children, not to be continually sort of looking over our shoulder, as it were, but to have confidence that we are the children of God and that we believe in the name of his son, Jesus Christ, and love each other as he commanded us.

Okay, let's stop there and let's sing that hymn that is based, of course, on John's words, number 581, Beloved, let us love, for love is of God.

[27 : 56] Amen. 1 John, it comes from 1 John 4, verse 7, in fact, if you have it there, so the passage we'll be looking at next.

581. Oh, I've got 851. Sorry, it's 581. Sorry. It's based on 1 John 4, verse 7.

1 John 4, verse 7. Thank you.