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*Cultivating Authentic Christian Community: A Study in 1 John*

## **Whose Child Are You?**

**1 John 3:1-10**

Pastor Bryan Clark

A little over 20 years ago my grandmother died. This was my mom's mother, and she lived in a small town in Minnesota called Swanville. When we went back for the funeral, there were a few relatives there, but most of the people were from that town—people I really didn't know. Throughout the day people kept coming up to me and they'd just stare at me. Then they would say, "You look like a Schrupp. You must be a Schrupp." I couldn't figure out why they were saying that, and I was tempted to say, "Well, you don't look so hot either!" I thought maybe "Schrupp" was some Minnesota word for "dork" or something. So I finally asked my mom, "Why do these people keep staring at me and then saying, 'You must be a Schrupp?'" She said, "Well, that was your grandma's maiden name."

The Schrupp genes are pretty powerful. My mom looks a lot like her mom; I look a lot like my mom; and my kids look a lot like me. So the next time somebody says, "Boy, Bryan's kids sure look like him," you can just say, "Oh, it's that Schrupp thing."

It is interesting how God has made us in such a way that we so strongly resemble our parents. That's by God's design, and there are reasons for that. But it isn't just genetic. It also has to do with habits and values and character. Sometimes that's amusing and sometimes it's discouraging. Sometimes I look at my kids and I see behaviors or attitudes, and I know where they came from, but I kind of wish they wouldn't pick those up.

I had a friend who had a little boy. The family and friends were all in the living room/family room area, and the little boy was pretending to be driving a toy car back and forth. He'd be "driving" along, then suddenly he'd stop and say, "You jerk!" Then he'd pretend to drive a little further, then stop and say, "You jerk!" His dad quickly realized where he had learned that. That's how his dad drives, so the little boy thought that is how you drive a car.

All of us as parents have had those moments, and they aren't real encouraging. Each of us should look in the mirror and ask ourselves, "If my child grew up to be exactly like me, would that be a good thing?" Every one of those areas where we say, "No, it probably wouldn't be in this and this and this . . ." is an area we need to work on, because our children are going to be like us in many ways. That's the way God has designed us.

I think it's interesting how subtly we teach values and character to our children. I was talking this week with a parent who has a son in an ice hockey league. I knew they had had a game, so I asked him, "How did the game go?" So we talked about it a little bit. But he said, "You know, the discouraging thing is that this coach is determined that every Sunday morning they're going to practice." When I asked him what he did, he said, "I told the coach my son will not be at any of those practices." You see, that's teaching that son a value system. It's teaching that son that there are things in our life which are a priority, and we will have to sacrifice some things in order to maintain our highest priorities. And kids do get that; they understand that.

As much as we become like our parents in many ways, there is a connection that's even stronger than that. That is the connection we have to our spiritual parent. It actually is more powerful than genetics. It's more powerful than environment—where we become like our spiritual parent.

John says something very interesting in his letter. He divides every single person on the face of the planet into one of two groups: either we are a child of God or we are a child of the devil. There is no middle ground; there are no other categories. As such, we will resemble that spiritual parent. As a matter of fact, he goes so far as to say the difference should be obvious, and we will look at 1 John 3 to see what makes that difference obvious.

At the end of chapter 2, in verse 29, John says, "If you know that He is righteous, you know that every one also who practices righteousness is born of Him." The New Testament uses very powerful language to describe what happens to us when we trust Jesus Christ to be our Savior. It doesn't say that we kind of change a little. It doesn't say that we now will try harder to be a better person. It doesn't say that we just add religion to our life and go on—like it's some new trend we're on. No, the language of the New Testament is very powerful. It says that when you trust Jesus Christ as Savior, you are *radically* changed. And the only language that can communicate how radical that change is, are the words: "to be born again." There is no change that could possibly be more radical than to understand that I have been born anew—that I have been born again. The old person that was, has died; there is a *new* me. That is as radical a change as is possible, and that is the language the New Testament uses to describe our conversion to Jesus Christ.

Remembering that the letter originally didn't have chapter divisions and verse divisions, the discussion really rolls right into chapter 3, verse 1: "See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God."

We are so used to that phrase that sometimes I don't think we even understand what it means. The word "see" really should have some sort of an exclamation mark to pull it off the page. As a matter of fact, I don't think the word "see" is probably strong enough. The King James uses the word "behold," which I think is better. This word actually means "to be astonished, to be amazed." It means to pull back and just stop and think about what an amazing thing it is that we have been called the children of God.

Do you realize that at one time you were a child of the devil? Do you realize that at one time you were an enemy of God and were deserving of eternal punishment? You were in complete rebellion against God, but God in His love has chosen to make you His child, with all the benefits and all the love that comes with that.

Imagine in your mind the absolute worst child you can think of: the most rebellious, the most angry, the most out of control, disastrous child you can imagine. If you were to bring him or her into your home, you can imagine the chaos that child would create. Then imagine kneeling down before that child and saying, "I just want you to know I love you. I love you so much I'm going to make you my own child. From this day forward you are going to be mine, and I'm going to love you and make you into everything that was ever intended for you to be."

That's what John is saying here. That's exactly what God did. God came along and said, "I'm going to make you My special child and pour out My love on you. All of the benefits and all of the family riches are yours." It says, "How great is the Father's love that

He would do that.” That word “great” is an interesting Greek word. It’s a word that means “from another country; foreign.” If they would experience something that they had never experienced before, they would use this word to say “that’s from another country; it’s foreign; we’ve never experienced anything like that before.”

One day Jesus was in a boat with His disciples, and a storm was coming upon them. The wind was blowing and the waves were crashing against the boat, and the disciples thought they were going to perish. Jesus stood up and quieted the wind and the waves, and the disciples said, “What kind of Man is this that even the wind and the waves obey Him?” That word “kind” is the exact same word as “great” used here. It’s a word that meant, “Where is this guy from? What country is He from?” Actually, what they were asking was, “What planet is this guy from? We’ve never seen this kind of power. We’ve never seen anything like it.” That’s the same word that John uses when he says, “How great is this love! It’s like nothing we’ve ever seen on this planet before.”

Some of you really struggle with accepting the love of God, because you’ve never known anything that even slightly resembles this kind of love. So you struggle to even accept that God could love you in that way. Because of that, you keep trying to prove yourself. You turn this relationship into a duty or drudgery of somehow trying to measure up enough so you can convince yourself that God should love you in that way. God doesn’t want that. He just wants you to accept the fact that, out of His love, He has made you His child.

As a matter of fact, the concept is so astonishing that John adds a line, almost anticipating that element of doubt within us. So he adds, “And such we are.” It’s almost as if he’s anticipating us to say, “It just can’t be.” So he says, “But we are. It’s true.”

“For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.” The world doesn’t know me as a child of God. The world has no idea what it means that I am an heir to the family fortune, to the riches of heaven. I’ve never once walked through the mall and had somebody gasp and put their hand over their mouth and say, “Look! He’s a child of God!” It’s never happened. People don’t know us, because they didn’t know Him. When Jesus walked this earth, people had no idea who He was. They didn’t know this Man who walked among them was the same Man who spoke and the universe came into place. He was one and the same. They didn’t know that this Man was the Man who waved His arm and the Red Sea parted. They didn’t know that this Man was in such glory in the heavens that when Moses asked to see that glory, He said, “No, Moses, if you saw My glory you wouldn’t even live.”

Philippians chapter 2 says that God set aside that unlimited glory in order to come down to earth to become a man and to die on the cross for the sins of the world. The people had no idea that was who Jesus was, and they have no idea today who the children of God are. The problem is that, to a great extent, we don’t understand who we are. We don’t understand what a remarkable thing it is to be a child of God.

John goes on in verse 2: “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.”

That is a remarkable verse. It is saying that we have no idea who we really are as children of God, and we have no idea what lies ahead for us as we become like Him. Not just some Christians, not just the cream of the crop, but every single person who has put his or her

faith in Jesus Christ is a child of God. You cannot even begin to imagine what you are becoming. But when you see Him as He is, for the first time you'll realize what it means to be His child and what you are becoming and what you will be for eternity.

What do you think of when you think of the statement, “We shall be like Him”? It's interesting how many Christians still think of Jesus in His incarnation, in His humility, as He was when He walked on this earth. But that's not right at all. Jesus isn't in some time warp where He's stayed that way for the rest of eternity. Remember, Jesus rose from the dead, ascended back to the Father and returned to His glory, seated at the right hand of the Father, and everything in the universe has been put in subjection under His feet. He is once again the God that is so glorious you cannot look at His glory and live. He is the God who is so exalted we can't even begin to imagine Jesus in His glory.

In Revelation, John has a vision of Jesus, and there are all kinds of imagery in it. But when he sees the exalted Christ, all he can do is fall on His face like a dead man, because He is so glorious. That's what John means when he says “we shall be like Him.” It's not talking about Jesus in His humility; it's talking about Jesus in His glory. And we won't even begin to understand that until we see Him as He is. Then we will finally begin to realize what it means that we are becoming like Him—a scene so amazing it's indescribable. It's unimaginable that we will be so much like Him in all His glory. That doesn't start someday. It started the moment you trusted Jesus as Savior. You are becoming like Him, and that is this journey, which is really quite amazing.

Verse 3: “And everyone who has this hope . . . .” Remember, the word “hope” here doesn't mean the same as saying, “Well, I hope so.” This type of hope is a guarantee; it's an absolute. Every believer has this hope—whether you feel like you're a failure; whether you feel like things are going well; wherever you're at. That's still where you're headed and that's what you are going to become—and that's our hope. “Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” We are going to be like Him. Like father... like child. That's the way we live our lives.

Now John is going to contrast that in verse 4: “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.” The Bible uses several terms to define sin. In this case John is calling it lawlessness. We might call it rebellion. It's rebelling against God and His law and His character. We are wanting to be our own gods and we're going to do things our own way. That's lawlessness.

What does it mean in verse 4 when it says, “Everyone who practices sin practices lawlessness”? In the next several verses, we're going to look very closely at the words and the grammar. Otherwise, this passage becomes very difficult to understand.

First of all, notice that “sin” is not plural. It's not sin(s), but rather it's sin (singular). What John means by that is a quality of sin—what we would most understand as the sin nature. In verse 4 he's not talking about people who have been redeemed, people who have been born again. He's talking about people who are still enslaved to the sin nature. And he's saying they practice sin as a way of life. As a matter of fact, the word “practice” is a verb in the durative present tense. The word “durative” means just what it sounds like—a duration of time, which basically means a way of life, a habit, a habitual pattern of living. John is saying it's lawlessness, and he's talking about the person who practices, as a way of life, this quality of sin. It's the exact opposite of everything that Jesus is.

Verse 5: “And you know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.” The very reason that Jesus came to earth is because people are enslaved to this sin nature, which He came to take away. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming, he said, “Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus was able to do that because He has no sin. He does not have a sin nature; He has no sin quality; He has no potential sin. Therefore, that’s what He came to do—to take away sin.

Verse 6, then, is John’s conclusion: “No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.” Because of who He is, because of who we are as His children, because of why He came to this earth—no one who abides in Him sins. What does he mean by that? Does he mean that no child of God commits sin? Perfectionism? No, that’s not what he means. Again, we need to look very closely at the grammar used here: “No one who abides in Him sins.” It’s the durative present, meaning a habitual pattern of life. It’s talking about sinning as a way of life, which is completely incompatible with who He is and who we are as children of God.

Let’s go back to chapters 1 and 2, just to remind ourselves of what we’ve already learned so we don’t get confused by all of this. Remember, John told us:

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.  
If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to  
    cleanse us from all unrighteousness.  
If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.  
My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if  
    anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;  
    and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also  
    for those of the whole world                   (1 John 1:8 – 2:2)

There’s no question in chapters 1 and 2 that John is writing to the children of God, to Christians, saying, “Yes, we do sin. And when we sin, we confess that sin and He is faithful and just to forgive us that sin.” The word for “sins” there, the verb tense, is in what we would call the aorist tense. That means a specific point in time. It’s the exact opposite of the durative present. In other words, what he’s talking about is not a habitual pattern of sin—not a way of life—but a sin. As we seek to be like Jesus, to walk this Christian life, let’s face it: we fail. We sin. We crash. But when that happens, we ought to feel a sense of conviction; because that is completely contrary to what we are becoming. It just doesn’t fit. So we feel a sense of conviction and we confess that sin. We repent—which means we turn the other way and we get back on track of becoming like Jesus.

But that’s completely different than what he’s saying in 3:6 about people who sin as a way of life, as a habitual pattern. He is saying here that those people are not children of God. They can’t be. He’s not just saying that Christians shouldn’t live that way; he’s saying they can’t. It is completely incompatible with everything that we are as His children.

Think of it this way. From time to time we stray. We just do. Sometimes people stray way off the path and they go through a period of time where they’re really walking contrary to what God wants. They go down a very destructive path. But all along that way, the child of God is miserable, because there’s something within him or her that continually says, “This is wrong; this is sin.” There is no way a person can ever be happy in that way of life if that person is truly a child of God. It is that conviction which brings that person to confess that sin, to repent and get back on the path of righteousness.

But what if you're able to go on that path, to sin as a way of life and there is no conviction? As a matter of fact, what if it's really no big deal? What if you call yourself a Christian, but you sin as a pattern of life and it doesn't even seem to phase you? Then John is saying, "Make no mistake, you are *not* a child of God." You *are not*.

Verse 7: "Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous." We're becoming like our spiritual parent. Verse 8: "The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil."

Again, note the language there: "He who practices sin {*durative present tense, meaning as a way of life, as a pattern of living*} is {*a child*} of the devil"—because you're just like your father. The devil has sinned from the beginning. That's how he lives his life. That's who he is.

John reminds us that Jesus came not only to take away sin but to destroy the works of the devil. That word "destroy" could be translated "to set us free" or "to loose us." In John 11, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus said, "Loose his grave clothes; set him free." It's the exact same word as "destroy the works of the devil." Jesus came to set people free, to loose them from the bondage of sin.

Therefore, verse 9 says: "No one who is born of God practices sin {*durative present, as a way of life, as a habitual pattern, as a mode of operation*}, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot {*notice it doesn't say should not*} sin {*durative present, as a way of life, as a pattern of living*}, because he is born of God."

John says that is "because the very seed of God dwells within a child of God." We would understand this seed to be the very presence of Jesus through His Holy Spirit, what he called in chapter 2, "the anointing." Jesus Himself dwells within us. That's the seed, the divine nature, that has replaced the old sinful nature. And that new divine nature will not allow us to sin as a way of life. It just can't; it's completely incompatible.

Think about what John has said: "Based on who Jesus is, based on what you are becoming as a child of God, based on why Jesus came to take away sin and to destroy the works of the devil, based on the fact that there is no sin in Jesus and He dwells within you as His child, there is just no way that you can live a lifestyle of sin without conviction and confession—if you're a child of God. You just can't, because those things can't coexist.

The language here is very exclusive. John isn't beating around the bush; he's not hinting at anything. He's right to the point. Look at the terminology: verse 3, "every one"; verse 4, "every one"; verse 6, "no one"; verse 9, "no one." He's drawing some pretty clear lines here.

And then he concludes in verse 10: "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious; any one who does not practice righteousness is not of God." John is saying that because all these things are true (who He is, what we're becoming, why He came, and that He dwells within us) our heart's yearning is to be like Jesus. Our heart's desire is for righteousness—for purity. Do we sometimes sin? Yes, we do. Sometimes we just crash and burn. But we know that it is wrong, and there's a misery in that. We sense the conviction and we confess that sin. He forgives that sin and we get back on track, because that's who we are.

But for those people who can sin as a way of life, as a habitual pattern, John is saying, “You cannot be a child of God and live that way. You just can’t. It’s completely incompatible with everything a child of God is.”

You remember that the false teachers were claiming to be very spiritual but they were living like the devil. They saw no problem with that: no conviction, no need to change. John is saying in very clear terms, “Make no mistake. They are not God’s children.”

Maybe somewhere along the way someone told you that if you say this little magic prayer, then when you die you’ll go to heaven. And that has been about the extent of it. You said this magic prayer, but other than that, you’ve just lived your life. There’s been kind of a habitual pattern of sin, and it really doesn’t even bother you, but you feel you’re still going to heaven.

You don’t understand that’s not true, because you’ve been deceived. You don’t get to heaven by saying a little magic prayer. You get to heaven by an act of your will—where you understand that you’re a sinner before God and you cannot save yourself. You believe Jesus died on the cross and you submit to Jesus as your Savior. You place your trust in Him, and at that point, you are *radically* reborn. You have become a child of God and you are beginning this journey of becoming like Him—a journey that ends in such astonishing fashion we can’t even begin to imagine it. Our heart’s desire is to be like our Heavenly Father. Along the way, we may fail...we may crash. But we confess, and we get back on track.

I understand it can be a sobering thing to realize that maybe I’ve never really been born again. Maybe I just said this magic prayer and thought that was going to cover it. But now God may be speaking to your heart and He is saying, “You cannot live the way you’ve been living and be a child of God.” The reality is that it’s better to come to grips with that now, rather than when you stand before God in judgment. Now you can still cry out to God and experience Jesus as your Savior and become a child of God and begin that wonderful journey.

This passage in 1 John isn’t a passage for you to use to judge someone else’s life. Don’t use this and say, “Oh, then so and so must not be a Christian.” That’s not the point. The point is to examine your own heart and make sure that your own heart is right before God and that you truly *are* a child of God.

If it’s clear that you’re a child of God and you have conviction of sin, and your heart’s desire is for righteousness, then there is every reason to celebrate. What an amazing thing it is that we have been made His children.

But if God is speaking to your heart and you’re thinking, *I’m not sure I’ve ever really been born again*, this would be the hour for you to choose Jesus as Savior. Take time to be quiet before God as you examine your heart and talk to Him. God desires to make you His special child and pour out His love upon you.