

## 1 John

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- **The Privileges of the Children of God (2:28—3:3)**
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## IVP NOTES

### The Children of God (3:1-3)

Three important ideas are inherent in the assertion that we are God's children: First, it is by God's initiative and power that we are born as the children of God. We do not bring about this relationship any more than a newborn baby caused its own birth and gave itself life.

Second, that God calls us *children of God* inaugurates a reality that will be brought to its fruition at a future time. Again, as a newborn baby lies in its parents' arms, they see it with eyes of hope, possibility and promise. A newborn's birth is not the goal of its existence; its growth and maturity are. Third, that we are God's children is evidence of God's active and creative love for us.

In its translation of 3:1 (*how great is the love . . .*), the NIV stresses the amount or extent of God's love for us. But we should not overlook the fact that it is the *way* that God has loved us which shows us how great that love is. The kind of love God demonstrates is active and creative love, which "calls" us the children of God. "Calling" means more than naming. It means the inauguration of a relationship, of a reality that can best be pictured by the metaphor of being God's own children. By God's creative act of love, we belong to God as surely and permanently as children belong to their parents. The Elder emphasizes this new relationship when he writes, *And that is what we are!* and *now we are children of God*. We do not simply *look at* a love that is external to us and marvel at its greatness; we *know* a love that resides *within* us. As Westcott comments, God's love is not simply exhibited, it is imparted to us (1966:93).

With the address to his *dear friends* (RSV "beloved"; Gk *agapetoi*) the Elder also emphasizes God's love (*agape*) for his children and their status as loved by God. And yet there is more to be said. The present fact that we are children of God is contrasted with two things: the lack of present recognition by the world (v. 1), and the future revelation of what we shall be (v. 2).

The world's failure to recognize Christians as God's children could refer to a general lack of understanding on the part of unbelievers as to what Christian life and claims are all about. In the historical context it may also refer specifically to the failure of the dissidents to accept the claims of the Johannine Christians. But the Elder reminds his readers that such lack of recognition should not surprise them, for the world did not recognize Jesus'

relationship to God either (Jn 8:19; 15:24; 16:3; even "his own" did not receive him, Jn 1:10). But even as there will come a time of public manifestation and recognition of Jesus (2:28), so there will be a full revelation of what the children of God will be (3:2, following the reading in the NIV footnote). If we are God's children *now*, even though the world does not recognize us, what we shall be someday is not known even to us. But since God's children are to reflect God, and since we are promised that when we see God *we shall be like [God]*, we can assume that what we shall be someday brings to fullness and completion the identity that we now cherish as God's own children.

Thus when Jesus appears (2:28) we will be transformed (3:2), and *we shall be like [God], for we shall see [God] as [God] is* (supplying the probable referent "God" for the ambiguous pronoun "him"). Both the Gospel and epistles assert that "no one has ever seen God" (Jn 1:18; 1 Jn 4:12, 20) except the Son, who makes God known. The statement *we shall see him as he is* does not imply that we have somehow been misled in understanding God or that we have been granted an inadequate vision of God in Jesus (Jn 14:8-10), any more than it implies that our present status as *children of God* is somehow inadequate or unsatisfactory. Just as it is true that we shall be changed, so also is it true that a future and new "seeing" of God is promised. We shall see God face to face, even as the Son who is "always at the Father's side" (Jn 1:1-18) sees God. Here John is not so much interested in speculating on what God is like, or precisely what we shall see in our future vision of God. Rather, the accent falls upon knowing God more fully and intimately than is possible for us now.

And when we see God, we shall become like God. This statement in 3:2 is closely linked to the statement in 3:3 that all those who have the hope of seeing God purify themselves, *just as [Jesus] is pure*. Again, the model for our relationship to God is the way in which Jesus relates to God. Jesus has seen God; Jesus is pure as God is pure. There may be an implicit reference here to the first "appearing" of Jesus to take away sin (1:7; 3:8). From the beginning to the end of our Christian existence, our hope is in the "appearing" or coming of Christ for us. Our transformation depends on his nature and work: he is pure, and takes impurity away. Thus those who have the hope of Jesus' coming purify themselves, *just as he is pure* (compare 3:5). Hope itself makes us pure, because our hope is trust in Christ's purifying and cleansing work for us.

And so the privilege of being God's children also holds within it the responsibility of living in accordance with the model given to us by God and lived out by Jesus. The privilege also carries with it the promise that someday we shall know the invisible God more fully than we do now, and that when we come to that time, we shall also know ourselves to be pure before him. Responsibility and promise will merge, both fulfilled—not by our own efforts so much as by the work of the One who created us and re-created us in his own image.

## **Jesus' Sinlessness, Human Sinfulness (3:4-6)**

While there are, as noted above, two parallel sections (3:4-6; 8-10) that discuss sin, the work of Christ and the implications for the Christian life, each has a distinctive focus. The first subsection draws a contrast between Jesus' sinlessness and human sinfulness.

*The character of sin (3:4).* John begins with what appears to be a definition of sin when he writes, *everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness*. In describing sin (*hamartia*) as lawlessness or iniquity (*anomia*), he stresses its severity. *Lawlessness* connotes disobedience to and rejection of the ways of God. If there are some who tolerate sin as an indifferent matter, this epistle does all in its power to dissuade them from that view.

More specifically, however, *lawlessness* may refer to the lawlessness expected in the last days, the ultimate rejection of God's truth to be manifested in false teaching and immorality (Mt 7:15, 23; 13:41; 24:11-12; 2 Thess 2:3). That meaning of *anomia* fits with John's emphasis that the secessionists are in fact the "antichrists" expected in the last hour (2:18): their sin is not just iniquity, but the iniquity of Antichrist. The fundamental understanding of sin, then, is that it is opposition to the will of God. That opposition need not be manifested in open rebellion or hostility, such as we think of when we consider the animosity to religion that some prominent atheists exhibit. Nor do we have to think of catastrophic Armageddons. Indeed, in Johannine thought the antichrists' work is deception (3:7; 4:1), and the primary sin is unbelief. While we might think of unbelief as a passive sin, a sin of omission, the Johannine community was prepared to view it as the supreme manifestation of human sinfulness and rejection of God. Thus the statement *sin is lawlessness* does more than offer a definition of sin. By showing sin for what it is, it encourages renunciation of sin (Smalley 1984:155). For how can sin—opposition to God—be part of the lives of those who vow their allegiance to God?

*Jesus' work and nature (3:5).* Indeed, those who have vowed their loyalty to God have done so through the mediating work of Jesus Christ. And here John says that Jesus' work is to *take away our sins*. If sin is opposition to God, Jesus' work stands in opposition to sin. If there is opposition between what sin effects and what Jesus effects, then to tolerate or ignore sin in human conduct is to undermine the purpose of Christ's work. It is to cast one's lot with sin, not with God.

For when Christ takes away our sins he takes away sin's consequences—the guilt the sinner has before God—but he also takes away its hold over us, transferring us from darkness to light (3:14) and breaking the power of evil over us (5:18). We are transferred from the sphere of opposition to God to the sphere of life with God. But if we continue in sin, we act as though Jesus had not died for us, as though he had not torn down the walls that trapped us in sin. For although *take away* includes the sense of bearing sin on our behalf, it may mean something closer to "abolish" or "do away with" sin. Jesus' life and death stand in radical opposition to sin and strike at the very heart of the power of sin. Furthermore, to condone or tolerate sin is to negate the life of Jesus as a model of active righteousness for the Christian (2:6).

*The implications of Jesus' work and nature for the believer (3:6).* Implicit in this section are two important poles in John's thought: On the one hand, he makes repeated references to Christ's role in taking away our sins, thereby stressing the *difference* between the purity and righteousness of Christ and the sinfulness of the believer. On the other hand, though, his emphasis on the present *likeness* between Christ and the Christian cannot be ignored. Both of these must be held together: it is Christ's death alone that purifies (1:7, 9), forgives (1:9) and atones (2:1) for our sin. Thus the statement *no one who lives in him keeps on sinning* depends more on an understanding of what Christ has done for us than it does on what we are able or commanded to do. The Elder's understanding of the Christian life was not developed in observation of the Christian but in perceiving the nature of Christ's life and work.

It follows that the nature of Jesus' work gives shape to the responsibility laid upon his followers, God's children. What is meant, then, by the statement *no one who lives in him keeps on sinning* is quite simple: sin is not the identifying characteristic of those who live *in him*.