



As discussed in previous lessons, a key issue of the early church that the author addresses in this letter is the heretical teaching known as *Gnosticism*. So insidious and pervasive was this doctrine that it has been portrayed as one of the most dangerous belief systems of the early church and one that threatened to “destroy the fundamentals of the faith and the churches.”¹ It is strongly held by Biblical scholars that the Apostle John was proactive in the fight against these heretical teachings (i.e., the denial of the bodily incarnation of Jesus Christ, Dualism, etc.), the origin of which he later attributes to the Antichrist (Ref. I John 4:3). The torch was then passed to other early church leaders, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian and Hippolytus, as the war for doctrinal purity continued to be waged during the subsequent years. At stake in this centuries-long battle boils down to the very definition of

what a Christian is. Were the people of God to live just like the world around them and simply make excuses for it (“that wasn’t me... it was my flesh”; “God doesn’t really care about my actions... only my thoughts are His concern”; or, “sorry I act like a mean-spirited jerk... actually, I’m a nice guy on the inside”; etc.) and hope that a holy and righteous God will somehow “just let it go”?

Authentic followers of Christ understand that our most holy faith is very practical; in fact, our genuineness as believers can be measured in three critical (and practical) areas: righteous living, love for the brethren and the belief that Jesus is the Christ, the incarnate God-man.²

The first two of these are addressed in today’s passage (note, the defining aspect of these verses and that they stem from a negative-contrast viewpoint).

⁹ No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

¹⁰ By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. - 1 John 3: 9-10.

In verse 9 we see the first test of authenticity: a genuine believer is characterized as one who does not *habitually* sin. That is to say “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set [him/her] free from the law of sin and of death.” Rom 8:2. From chapter 1, we understand that this does not mean that Christians never sin (or, even, that at some point in their life, they will never fall into egregious sin).

It does mean that genuine Christians will ultimately triumph over sin and death because our God-ordained election guarantees it. John 5:24; Romans 10:9,10; I Cor. 15:57; 1 John 5:4,5; Revelation 2:11, 17; Revelation 21:7.

Q1: What is the seed that abides in the Christian? As Christians, what (if any) is our responsibility for promoting the efficacy of this seed?

Q2: How does one reconcile the statement in v. 9, "he cannot sin" with the passage in I John 1:8, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us."

In verse 10 we see the second test of authenticity: a genuine believer is characterized as one who loves his brother.

Additionally, v. 10 continues the theme of defining a Christian from a negative point of view: the children of God are not those who "do not practice righteousness" and a Christian [man] is not one who "does not love his brother."

One can obviously infer from this verse (and other related verses in I John) that true followers of Christ *are* practicing righteousness and *do* love their brother.

From the historical perspective of this book (i.e., in the context of the Gnostic heresy of the day) it is easy to see how John might state these principles in the negative; it adds power to the phraseology by forcing the reader to engage in self-examination: do I practice righteousness?; do I love my brother? Further, the use of this device is more aggressive and assertive than to simply say, "you must practice righteousness" or "you must love your brother." These verses have a defining element. The fact is, the Gnostics were teaching and practicing a dualistic approach to life that was antithetical to the teachings of Christ and the Apostle John was being very deliberate in his refutation of those teachings.

Q3: Who are the "Gnostics" of our day and what flavor of heresy are they "peddling" to the modern-day church? Is the church buying it?

Conclusion

As is the case today, the early church had many distracters, critics and enemies – both from within and without; that this would occur was predicted by the Apostle Paul years earlier (Acts 20:28-31). The Apostle John and other church leaders that followed were led by God to stand against the apostasy of those who would lead the flock astray. In the passage we've studied today, we see the practicality of the scripture and the unimpeachable character of God in the living out of our holy Christian faith: practice righteousness and love your brother. Our faith is not in the abstract. It is not hard to understand for the one whose heart is open to the teachings of Christ. On the other hand, it is impossible for an unbeliever to fully obey God. Victory over temptation and sin is only attained by those who have God's seed within them. Yet, as Jesus taught in the parable of the sower, only the good soil produces fruit. The good soil refers to the genuine followers of Christ who "do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4b) and make it their aim to stay in the word (John 8:31-32, 36) so as to obey it. As Moses has said, "For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life." - Deuteronomy 32:47a.

¹ Introduction to I John, John MacArthur Study Bible, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2006, p. 1931.

² The New Open Bible, Study Edition, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1990, p. 1459.