

Living Obediently - True Children of God and the Fight with Sin

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[0 : 00] I think we will all have had the experience of seeing a powerful film at the cinema which is so vivid and so compelling in its story and its atmosphere that it transports you entirely in your thinking into another world.

And for a couple of hours or more while you're watching the film you're caught up in an experience totally different from your normal humdrum existence. And you're so taken out of yourself at the end of the film that it's rather hard to readjust to reality.

You know that feeling, you step out of the cinema, you discover it's a cold December night in Glasgow. And it can take your mind an hour or two to adjust and move back from the powerful imaginary world that you've been in back to the real world of your ordinary life.

The two worlds seem to be pulled apart and have virtually nothing to do with each other. Now as we open the first letter of John in the New Testament I think we have a similar experience of a world apart.

A world quite different from our own world. Let me explain what I mean about these two very different worlds. Our own age at the beginning of the 21st century is an age of fundamental insecurities.

[1 : 21] For example, technology is changing faster than even the best brains can keep pace with. Our social structures are changing also and in some respects disintegrating particularly in the realm of marriage and family life.

Then thinking around the world, the geography of religion is rapidly changing. No longer is Hinduism confined to India or Islam to the Middle East and North Africa.

These faiths are colonising the Western world as well including our own country. And political geography is changing as well. We have to speak about the former Soviet Union or the former Yugoslavia.

We have to learn new names of new countries that we were unfamiliar with. And we have to get our tongues around them. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and Bosnia and so on and so forth.

So whether we're thinking of technology or sociology or religion or geography, the goalposts seem to be moving every few years. And we can be left panting and confused.

[2 : 25] Nothing is as it used to be. And even in the Christian churches, what is held onto seems to be grasped less firmly than it was a generation or two ago.

So Christian leaders seem to speak with less certainty and more hesitation in matters of doctrine and ethics. Now against this scenario with which we are very familiar, to enter one John is to enter another world.

A world characterised by assurance, confidence, boldness and knowledge. And therefore if we read this first letter of John and accept its message, not just superficially, but really by swallowing it and ruminating over it and digesting it, then our own thinking and our own lives will become marked by assurance, confidence, boldness and knowledge.

And let's remember what we're dealing with here. We're not simply dealing with the personal viewpoint of a Christian leader or his opinions. No, we're listening to God's words to us through the Apostle John.

It is God, our tremendous, wonderful Father, who wants us to enjoy assurance and confidence as Christians and who does not want us to be to our dying day tentative and confused about where we stand with him.

[3 : 51] Speaking as a Christian pastor, I suspect that many in our churches, not perhaps so much this church, but many in the churches, feel tentative and confused about God and would be greatly helped if they could see what solid convictions the Apostle John teaches in this letter.

So I pray that our studies in one John over these next few weeks will prove to be a real blessing as we come to understand better John's message about certainty and assurance.

Because that is what this letter is all about. In fact, if you'll turn with me first of all to chapter 5, verse 13, I'll read that verse out. It's on page 1023 in these big Bibles.

But 1 John chapter 5, verse 13, this verse I think is in a sense the verse that sums up the message of the letter more than any other verse. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, written to Christians, you see, to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

That's his key purpose in this letter. His aim is that his Christian readers may know that they have eternal life. Now that's the complete opposite from this day's world, today's world, with its confusions and uncertainties about God.

[5 : 09] God wants us not to be in a dither of doubt to our dying day about where we stand with him. He wants to deliver us from being open-minded. I think it was G.K. Chesterton who had a very useful thing to say about being open-minded.

He said, the purpose of having an open mind is the same as the purpose of having an open mouth, namely, to close upon something solid. Chesterton enjoyed his meals, I think.

He was a well-built citizen. But this is the point, isn't it? We need to have convictions about the Christian faith. That's what the Apostle John is teaching us. God wants us to know that we have eternal life and this letter teaches us the grounds upon which that assurance about eternal life is based.

Now let me mention one other thing, perhaps two other things by way of introduction. This letter, like all the New Testament letters, was written to address a particular church situation. Just what that situation was like, I think, will emerge as we go along.

But let me try and describe it in outline. Almost certainly, the Apostle John was writing to the church at Ephesus, or the churches in the area of Ephesus, greater Ephesus, and there was trouble in the churches.

[6 : 25] There was a split in the church, not for the last time in church history. And you'll see that split described in chapter 2, verse 19, where John writes, they went out from us, but they were not of us.

For if they had been of us, they would have continued with us, but they went out. In other words, they left us, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. So a group of people have left the fellowship.

And John is obviously glad that they have left, because in the previous verse, verse 18 of chapter 2, he has described these people as antichrists. A very strong word, which means people who deny the truth about Christ, and who are against him.

Now just imagine what it must feel like if a church breaks apart like that. I'm sure some of you will have been involved in the past in the breakup of a church. I've never been involved in that sort of situation, and I hope I may never have to be, but it must be a very unsettling thing.

The breakup would inevitably be preceded by months of arguing and wrangling and people verbally attacking each other. Very unpleasant feelings would be generated on all sides.

[7 : 37] One group defending one theological position, and another group defending a contradictory position. And eventually, this group that John describes as antichrists stalk out, bang the door, and that's it.

They're gone. And the remaining ones are left feeling bruised and battered. And they're bound to scratch their heads and say, well, are we right?

Maybe these others have seen something that we haven't seen. And John the Apostle, appreciating that these Christians are feeling bruised and battered, writes to them to assure them that they are right in their convictions about Jesus, and equally to assure them that the ones who have departed are wrong.

So as we enter this world of one John, a world marked, as I said a moment ago, by assurance and confidence, we find that it's also a world in which firm and clear lines have to be drawn between truth and error.

This means that John has to be both positive and negative and negative in his teaching. So he makes great positive declarations such as, God is light in chapter 1, verse 5, and God is love in chapter 4, verse 16, but he also has to speak of the liar in chapter 2, verse 22.

[8 : 57] That's the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. He has to speak of false prophets in chapter 4, verse 1. And if you want an example of a very sharp line being drawn, just look at chapter 3, verse 10.

By this, it is evident who are the children of God and who are the children of the devil. Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, etc. Now part of our modern confusion and uncertainty is that we're very hesitant to draw such sharp lines as John is drawing here.

We recoil from the idea that certain people should be categorized as children of the devil or liars.

We want to say, but hang on, dear apostle, can't you be a bit kinder and gentler in describing these people who take a different position?

But his answer to us would be, no, my 21st century friends, we must be clear about where Christianity parts company from anti-Christianity. If we want to have confidence and assurance about God and about eternal life, we've got to be prepared to draw lines.

We sometimes have to say, no. The price you pay for not drawing lines is that you end up bereft of confidence and assurance about the truth.

[10 : 18] So friends, are you beginning to breathe this atmosphere of 1 John? It's a bracing atmosphere. It requires some courage for 21st century people to breathe it, but if we are prepared to breathe it and to accept John's firm distinctions between truth and error, we shall then end up in chapter 5, verse 13, knowing with assurance that we have eternal life.

If we're not prepared to go with the apostle, we shall end up in confusion. Now, I promise we'll get to the text properly in a couple of minutes, but let me just stand back from this for a moment to ask what place the doctrine of assurance holds in the modern evangelical church.

My guess is, just looking around at the churches in England and Scotland generally, on the preaching menu of many churches, I guess it doesn't feature very prominently.

We've all heard some talks and sermons about assurance, but people don't seem to major on it these days in the way that they did some generations ago. Professor Don Carson writes this, compared with the way the doctrine of assurance has at times in the past occupied an important place in Christian preaching and counsel, the widespread neglect of the subject today is frankly astonishing.

So maybe we in our churches, not so much this church I think, but in many churches, we need to agitate to have it reinstated. If the central message of the Bible is about the reconciliation of a holy God with rebellious sinners through the completed work of Christ, it's pretty important to be sure that we ourselves belong to the body of those who are reconciled, isn't it?

[12 : 03] We need to know these things. To lack assurance will ultimately lead us to real distress. I think of an elderly man in our congregation at Burton-on-Trent who died some years ago.

He'd been in the church, in the church choir actually, for more than 70 years, I think he was nearly 80 when he died. He'd been a member of the PCC, that's like the Kirk Session, for decades.

He loved the church building, he loved all the trappings of Anglicanism. And I feel fairly sure that he did indeed trust the Lord Jesus as his saviour. But the final weeks of his life, when I was visiting him in hospital, were weeks when he was agitated and distressed, and there was clearly a lack of assurance about his salvation.

And it was a sad thing to see this man end his days in that state of mind. This doctrine of assurance is going to be very important to us on our deathbeds, and if it's to be well into our systems on our deathbeds, it needs to get there decades before.

Do you sometimes imagine yourself, as I do, propped up in the bed in Ward 17 in the hospital, sipping weak tea out of a spout with your loving friends and family around you, encouraging you?

[13 : 14] We need to understand this doctrine of assurance then, friends, don't we? But it isn't just for the end of our lives, not at all. Assurance that we're Christians is one of the secrets of a happy and productive Christian life here and now, before we get to that stage.

When we know that we belong to the Lord Jesus forever and to God the Father, that gives us a rock-solid assurance and foundation for life, a foundation that can stand up to and survive the traumas and shocks that inevitably life will throw at us.

And just as loving human parents want to assure their children of their limitless love for their children, so the Heavenly Father wants to assure his children of his limitless love and good purpose for them.

And that is why he caused the Apostle John to write this letter, that we who believe in the name of the Son of God may know that we have eternal life.

Well, now in tackling this letter, clearly we're not going to be able to look at every verse or every paragraph. We'd need a month of Sundays to do that. What I'd like to do is to take that chapter 5, verse 13 as the key statement of John's purpose in the letter and then I want to look at how the substance of the letter serves that central purpose.

[14 : 36] And three main points will emerge and I want to look at each of these three in our three Sunday mornings together with one John. The question is how do we know who is the true Christian, the real Christian?

And John tells us. Here's the substance of the letter. First of all, the true Christian lives obediently. Secondly, the true Christian loves other Christians.

And thirdly, the true Christian holds the truth or the true doctrine about Christ. That's what the letter is all about. Testing out who truly belong to Christ and who doesn't.

The true Christian lives obediently, loves other Christians and holds the truth about Christ. And because John speaks to us as an apostle, these are God's measures or God's criteria for knowing who truly belongs to Christ.

So first, for today, the true Christian is marked by an obedient life, living obediently. Let me give you a flavour of this aspect of 1 John by reading a few key verses.

[15 : 39] First of all, chapter 1, verses 5 and 6. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. chapter 2, verse 29. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness, that's living obediently, has been born of him.

Chapter 3, verse 9. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning for God's seed abides in him and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

Or chapter 3, verse 24. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in him and he in them. Chapter 5, verse 3.

For this is the love of God that we keep his commandments. Now, hearing me read those texts may well send, in a way I hope it does send, a feeling of horror down your spine because it appears to suggest that God is demanding perfection of us before we can be sure that we're Christians.

[16 : 59] Look at chapter 3, verse 6 for another hair-raising verse. 3, 6. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning. No one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.

Now, friends, we know, don't we, at least we do if we have an atom of self-knowledge inside ourselves, we know that we sin frequently in thought, word, and deed, and in the things that we have left undone.

If you were to ask my wife, and you're free to at the end of this service, if she is married to a morally perfect specimen of humanity, a fine upright specimen of Christian humanity, I think, first of all, she'd give you a quizzical look, and then, secondly, she'd burst out laughing.

If we have an atom, not only of self-knowledge, but also of humility, we know how pockmarked we are in terms of our character and our behaviour. And yet, John teaches us here in chapter 3, verse 6, that no one who continues in sin has either seen God or known him.

So, how do we understand this? Well, let's turn back to chapter 1, verses 8, 9, and 10, and I think we begin to see a little bit of light shed for us. So, chapter 1, verses 8, 9, and 10.

[18 : 14] If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. Now, what seems to be going on is this. The group of people who have left the church, the ones that John has described as the Antichrists, in chapter 2, verse 18, this group seems to have been making outrageous claims about their own spirituality.

So, when John writes in chapter 1, verse 8, if we claim to be, or if we say, we have no sin, you can almost hear an echo of what these people were claiming for themselves.

They were saying, of course, in our group, in our fraternity, we are sinless. Now, that's a heavy dose of spiritual elitism, isn't it? If a person seriously claims to be sinless, either he is simply deceiving himself, rather in the fashion of the murderer who tells himself so many times that he didn't actually commit the murder that he ends up seriously believing that he didn't. There's either self-deception of that kind, or claiming sinlessness entails redefining sin, moving the moral goalposts, saying, for example, that lying and stealing and adultery, despite the Ten Commandments, are not actually sinful anymore.

[19 : 50] So, if you reduce the number of things which you define as sinful, and if you only leave within the sin category a few things that you know you can steer clear of, you can then end up claiming sinlessness for yourself.

Now, whatever was actually going on in these fellowships written to by John, some form of sinlessness was being claimed by these people. And this is why John boldly says in verse 8, if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves.

So, in just a few words he pricks the bubble of this pride and folly. I wonder if any of you have met claims of sinlessness in people that you've encountered.

I can't ever remember meeting a person in my short life who has claimed to be sinless. Maybe the soil of modern western culture is inhospitable to this particular plant at the moment, but there's been plenty of it in the history of the church.

And it wasn't just a first century phenomenon either. In one form or another it has popped up again and again and in recent times. There's a lovely story told of Charles Spurgeon, the 19th century Baptist preacher who had a great sense of humour.

[21 : 04] And he was sitting at a meal table one day with a man who claimed to be sinless. So Spurgeon picked up a large jug of water that was on the table and he emptied it over the man's head.

And the man's angry outburst quickly revealed that sin was actually alive and well in him. And this is what Spurgeon said. Ah, my friend, I can see that sin in you was not actually dead.

It had temporarily fainted and it needed a jug of water to revive it. So to get back to the point, John makes it plain in chapter 1, verse 8, 9 and 10 that we are sinners if we say that we have no sin in our natures, that is self-deception, and if we claim, in verse 10, to be without sin in our actual conduct, we're making God out to be a liar.

Because throughout the Bible he exposes our wretched sinfulness so penetratingly. So, is John contradicting himself when he tells us in chapter 3, verse 6 that no one who lives in Christ keeps on sinning?

And in chapter 3, verse 9 that no one born of God makes a practice of sinning? Well, it would be a rash reader who dismissed these things as a contradiction.

[22 : 22] So let's wrestle for a moment with chapter 3, verse 9 and we'll see if we can see what the apostle is saying. So here's the whole of verse 9 again. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

Now you'll see that the dominant idea in this verse is the idea of the new birth and you will know that that's an important element in John's Gospel. It's central to the Nicodemus passage in John chapter 3 where Jesus says to Nicodemus unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. It's also prominent in the opening chapter, the first chapter of John's Gospel where John writes to all who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God.

Children born not of natural descent nor of human decision nor of a husband's will but born of God. So a born again person is a born of God person, a child of God.

That's one of the Bible's most striking definitions of the Christian. Now here in 1 John chapter 3 verse 9 John speaks, you'll see, of God's seed remaining in the person who is born of God.

[23 : 41] If John had been angling this letter slightly differently he might well have written of the Holy Spirit being put into the person who is born again because after all it is the Spirit who is the energising life breath of God who brings about the new birth.

But in using this word seed at this point John is conveying the idea of ongoing growth. Now many of you I'm sure are gardeners.

You'll be looking forward to sowing seeds in your greenhouse and out of doors and so on in a few months time. Cucumbers and sweet corn and radishes. And the result of your sowing will be plain

to see as the spring and the summer goes on.

The seed is in the soil or in the potting compost and it produces the goods gradually. The plant starts small but it grows gradually to strength and maturity.

Now John is saying that when this seed this powerful principle of new life is implanted into a person something is started which may well begin small but inevitably will grow in strength and maturity with the passage of time.

[24 : 53] The new birth transforms a person over time. Now you know this if you've been a Christian for more than five minutes and you know it as well as you look around at your Christian friends.

When a person particularly a person of perhaps 40 or 50 or 60 becomes a Christian that person is likely to say you know since I've come to the Lord it's as though a reconstruction job has been going on in my mind.

That's the way people describe the early stages of the seed of God getting to work in their life and conscience and thinking. So the thrust of this verse 9 in chapter 3 is that this growing force of life in the new Christian inevitably will be driving back and bit by bit reducing the grip of sinful attitudes and habits.

John is saying it is impossible to be just going on in the same old sinful ways and habits when you've been born again. God's new life will have its way.

You will be transformed. Now we mustn't think that all this is going to happen automatically and that we have no part ourselves to play in the process.

[26 : 03] Not at all. The New Testament expects us to cooperate and commands us to cooperate in this process of the growth of the new life. So typically Paul for example Galatians 5 says to us walk by the spirit or keep in step with the spirit.

He says in Colossians chapter 3 put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature. That's what we have to do. If God puts the spirit into us the growth begins but we have to cooperate.

Peter the Apostle says in 2 Peter chapter 1 make every effort to add to your faith goodness and to goodness knowledge and so on and so on. John says in this letter chapter 3 verse 3 everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself.

And that present tense there means goes on and on purifying himself. So it would be cloud cuckoo land for us to think that this process is going to go on without our active cooperation.

We cooperate and it's going to make us sweat at times but the result will be a life where sinful actions and attitudes are increasingly not welcome and not at home.

[27 : 16] So verse 9 in chapter 3 is not teaching that the Christian never sins or that the Christian never can sin it is teaching that the Christian and sin no longer belong together.

There is an incongruity between them. Sin and the Christian are no longer friends. There is a hostility a growing hostility between them. The new birth entails us in taking up arms against sin. So for example imagine a man who for years has been a gossip and a backbiter and a tale teller. Those sinful attitudes are deeply ingrained in his character.

He then becomes a Christian. Now the powerful principle of God's new life will immediately begin to be at work in him. Those bad habits of his are so deeply ingrained in him that he is unable to drop them all overnight.

And in the early days of his life as a Christian there are still times when he gossips and says unkind and untrue things about other people. But the big change is that he now does so with a great sense of discomfort.

[28 : 30] He is now aware of how wrong it is how it dishonors his new master to speak like this about other people. Before his conversion he did these things and he said these things carelessly with hardly a twinge of conscience.

But now he is fighting them and he feels pretty bad about it. He feels rotten because the power of God's new life in him is battling with his sinful ways.

That is why the Christian life is sometimes painful because of this battle going on between the power of the Holy Spirit and our sinful nature. This is why the first year or two of the Christian life particularly can be so painful because suddenly you are on a moral battleground that you have never actually set foot on before.

God is determined to have his way with you and he is impelling you to engage with the enemy. And that is why it is such a good sign when the young Christian says I am going through such a difficult

patch I am finding the battle so hard.

Well the reason is that God is lovingly changing that young Christian into a 1 John chapter 3 verse 9 person. He is not allowing you to continue in the old ways and you won't.

[29 : 42] You won't. So let's try to tie up the relationship between chapter 1 verse 8 if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and chapter 3 verse 9 no one born of God makes a practice of sinning.

We need to understand that these two verses complement each other and that there is no real contradiction between them. Chapter 1 verse 8 and verse 10 plainly teach that our lives and our conduct are sinful.

Chapter 3 verse 9 and chapter 3 verse 6 teach not the impossibility of sin in the Christian but the incongruity of sin in the Christian.

The painful profound incongruity of sin in the Christian. You wouldn't go to a funeral service dressed in a flowered open necked shirt and a pair of Bermuda shorts would you?

There'd be something horribly incongruous and out of place wearing that kind of clothing at that sort of occasion. It wouldn't be impossible you could do it but it would be painfully unfitting.

[30 : 52] So when John says in chapter 3 verse 9 that no one born of God will continue in sin he means that the growing Christian has made a decisive break with his former godless ways and is now embarked on a different course.

He doesn't continue with that old way of life and with every year that passes he sees the gap widening between what he once was and what he now is.

As John Newton so helpfully put it I'm not what I ought to be I'm not what I hope to be I'm not what I wish to be but by the grace of God I'm not what I was.

It's in that sense that no one born of God will continue in sin or continue to sin. Now if all this is so it's going to mean that right up to our dying day we shall be actively engaged in battling with sin.

Complacency in this is not an option for us. There needs to be always a certain level of dissatisfaction with our present state of progress. Just think of some elderly Christian that you know whose godliness and Christian maturity you admire and then ask the question how has that person reached that state of maturity?

[32 : 17] Well there's only one root to it and that is lifelong battle with sin and dogged perseverance in the battle. God's new life God's seed only grows to maturity and fruitfulness with the involvement of our active cooperation and perseverance.

I think of a lovely very elderly Christian lady in our church down in Burton-on-Trent who is I guess one of the most mature and lovely Christians that I know. I remember talking to her a little while ago in such a way as for her to reveal to me that she was still doing battle with sin.

I was astonished having a chat with her after an evening service to see her eyes filling with tears as we talked together and I asked her what the trouble was and she told me of a battle that she was fighting and this was all to do with integrity in personal relationships.

I thought to myself how marvellous to see this lovely old godly Christian woman still well over 80 but still not complacent with her life still battling against sin at that late stage in life.

So let me ask friends is there something that you or I might have grown complacent about in our lives if we're Christians? Something about which we may be saying well it's not really harmful it's only a peccadillo or we might say nobody knows about it, it's not hurting anybody else but it is.

[33 : 42] All sin is first and foremost against God. It hurts him, it grieves him. Look with me at chapter 5 verse 3 For this is the love of God that we keep his commandments.

Obedience to God is so much more than duty. Obedience to God springs out of love for him. Jesus says if you love me you will keep my commandments.

And in the Bible loving God is never primarily defined in terms of uplifted emotions. We're so used to hearing love defined in terms of an upsurge of powerful feeling in our breasts or something like that.

Now I'm not saying that the emotions are not involved in loving God. They certainly are. We're to love him after all with heart and soul and mind and strength and if that doesn't include the emotions then I'm a Martian.

But the big Bible emphasis is that we're to love God by obeying his commands. And the converse of that is that if we are disobedient to his commands we don't love him whatever we might claim for ourselves.

[34 : 57] So here is John's first measure or first criterion. We know the true Christian by his or her obedient lifestyle. To claim sinlessness is self deception but equally to claim to be a Christian without the evidence of a life at war with sin that too would be a self deception.

Well let's bow our heads and we'll pray and ask the Lord to help us. Amen. Amen. Amen.