

1 John - Commentaries by Hamilton Smith

The Epistles of John, 1 John 2:3-11: The Characteristics of Divine Life (2:3-11)

The first portion of the Epistle presents eternal life as manifested in perfection in Christ on earth. This life, imparted to the believer, enables its possessor to have fellowship with divine Persons and thus taste fullness of joy.

In this second portion of the Epistle, the apostle brings before us the two great characteristics of the divine life in its manifestation down here—obedience to God and love to our brethren. The practice of these two qualities, or the failure to exhibit them, becomes the test as to whether the profession of knowing Christ (verse 4), abiding in Christ (verse 6), and walking in the light (verse 9), is true or not.

(Vss. 3-4). To be in the light of the full revelation of God, and to have fellowship with God, is to know God. The true knowledge of God will lead to the recognition that God is sovereign and we are His creatures, and therefore submission is due to God. We are dependent upon God, and this dependence is expressed by subjection or obedience to God. If we say we know God, and yet walk in disobedience to His will, our profession is false and the truth has no abiding place in us.

(Vs. 5). Moreover, the one that keeps His word, in him verily the love of God is perfected. The Lord Jesus, as Man, walked in perfect subjection and obedience to the will of the Father. His Father's will was the motive as well as the rule for His every act and word. He could say, "I do always those things that please Him" (John 8:29). In result, the love of the Father was perfectly known and enjoyed by Him. So the Lord can say to His disciples, "If ye keep My commandments, ye shall abide in My love; even as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love" (John 15:10).

(Vs. 6). If, then, we profess to abide in Him, and under His influence enjoy fellowship with the Father, it will lead to a walk even as Christ walked, with the blessed experiences of the Father's love that He enjoyed. While down here we cannot be what He was, for He was without sin; but it is our privilege to walk as He walked. He pleased not Himself, but did only those things that pleased the Father. We have been chosen to obey as Christ obeyed and to walk and please God (1 Peter 1:2; 1 Thess. 4:1).

(Vs. 7). That which the apostle writes to believers is no new commandment, but the word which they have heard from the beginning; for he is writing of the life, marked by obedience and love, that was expressed in absolute perfection in Christ. Any one professing to write anything new of this life would be making the false pretension to give light beyond that already perfectly expressed in Christ.

(Vs. 8). What, indeed, is new is that the life that was expressed in perfection in Christ has been imparted to believers, so that it can be said "which thing is true in Him and in you." For the believer to live this life in fellowship with divine Persons is possible, as God has been fully revealed in the Person of the Son, and has thus come into the light. God having been revealed, the darkness and ignorance of God that characterized the world is "passing" (N. Tn.). When the Sun of righteousness arises, the whole world will come into the light. All will know the Lord. Then the darkness will be past; but, even now, the darkness is passing, as people emerge from Judaism and heathenism, and come into the light of the revelation of God in Christianity.

(Vss. 9-10). The apostle has spoken of obedience as one of the two great tests of the reality of the profession to know God and thus be in the light. He now speaks of love as a second characteristic of those who are truly in the light. It follows, on the one hand, that he who hates his brother is in darkness or ignorance of God, however much he may profess to have the life and be in the light. On the other hand, the one that loves his brother abides in the light and will not act in a way to stumble him.

(Vs. 11). A Jew professed to have the knowledge of God and thus be in the light, and yet he hated and persecuted the Christian, proving that he was not in the light of God revealed in Christ.

Such an one is in "the darkness, and walks in the darkness, and knows not where he goes, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (N. Tn.). This is not simply one who is in a state of darkness, as might be the case with a true Christian who, having fallen under a cloud, entertains bitter thoughts against his brother. It supposes one who is in "the darkness", that is, in a system in which there is no revelation of God. "The darkness" is the absence of the revelation of God, and is an expression used in contrast with "the true light", which is the revelation of God.

Here, then, we have the great characteristics of eternal life -obedience and love. Moreover, the passage clearly shows that if we possess the life, and live the life, it will lead us:

Firstly, into the knowledge of God the Father—we shall know Him (verses 3-4).

Secondly, knowing the Father, we shall walk in obedience to His will (verses 3, 4).

Thirdly, keeping His commandments, we shall be confirmed in His love (verse 5).

Fourthly, thus walking in obedience and love, we shall walk even as Christ walked (verse 6).

Fifthly, walking as Christ walked, we shall love one another (verse 10).

The Epistles of John, 1 John 2:12-27: Growth in Divine Life (2:12-27)

The apostle has spoken of the eternal life manifested in perfection in Christ; he has also brought before us the two great characteristics that will mark those who possess the life as they pass through this world—obedience and love. In the portion of the Epistle that follows, the apostle shows that, while all believers possess the life, yet there is growth in divine life.

He views believers as forming the family of God, and he uses the relationships of the ordinary life—fathers, young men and babes—to set forth different stages of spiritual growth in the apprehension of the truth and in Christian experience. He does not use these terms to set forth stages in the natural life, but, rather, distinctions in spiritual growth. A person converted at an advanced age would be spiritually but a babe, whereas a believer comparatively young in years might, by spiritual progress, become a father. The apostle sets forth, moreover, the special snares to which believers are exposed at different stages of growth.

(Vs. 12). Before speaking of the different stages of spiritual growth, the apostle refers to the blessing that is true of the whole family of God. He addresses all believers as "children"; this is a term of endearment. He then states that forgiveness of sins is the great blessing that marks every member of the family of God. Apart from this blessing they would not belong to this family. The apostle does not write to sinners in order that they may be forgiven, but to believers because they are forgiven. Moreover, as he is going to speak of experiences and spiritual progress, he reminds believers that they are forgiven "for His Name's sake". As believers, he reminds us that we are not forgiven because of anything that we are, or because of any experience however real—that would be for our sakes. We are forgiven because of what God has found in Christ and His work—"for His Name's sake". The Lord Himself had instructed His disciples "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His Name among all nations" (Luke 24:47).

Peter, in carrying out the Lord's commission, proclaims to the Gentiles "that through His Name whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). Thus forgiveness of sins is no matter of attainment; it is proclaimed to us through the Lord Jesus and received by faith in Christ (Acts 13:38-39).

(Vs. 13). Having stated what is common to the whole family of God, the apostle sets forth three stages of spiritual growth under the terms fathers, young men and babes. He does not write to "old men", young men and babes. Old men would hardly be an apt figure to set forth the highest stage of spiritual growth, for the term implies feebleness and decay. He uses the term "fathers", which suggests ripeness and maturity of experience.

The outstanding characteristics of each class are first stated: the fathers have known Christ that is from the beginning; the young men are characterized by having overcome the wicked one; the babes have known the Father.

In the course of natural growth we may in large measure lose the characteristics of an earlier stage of growth. It is not so in spiritual growth. The young men do not cease to know the Father because they have learned to overcome the wicked one; the fathers do not cease to overcome the wicked one because they have learned to know Him that is from the beginning.

In writing to each class the apostle uses the words "because ye have", showing there was a point of sympathy between himself and each class. It was practically saying, I write unto you because you are enjoying what I am enjoying. The three stages cover the whole ground of practical Christianity. The one possessing all these characteristics would be a fully developed Christian.

(Vs. 14). Fathers. Having given us the outstanding characteristics of each stage of Christian growth, the apostle again refers to each class, presenting in the case of the young men and the babes their special dangers. Of the fathers he has nothing fresh to add; he repeats, "Ye have known Him that is from the beginning." The question may arise, "Do not the young men and the babes know Christ?" Surely they know Christ as their Savior, but to know Christ as the One who is from the beginning implies that we not only know Christ as saving us from our sins and judgment, but that we have so advanced in the spiritual life that we have discerned in Christ the One who is the beginning of an entirely new world of blessing, according to the counsels of the Father's heart. "From the beginning" has the force of "from the outset". To know Him that is from the beginning is to realize that, with the coming of Christ, there is the beginning of an entirely new creation in which the former things will forever have passed away. Those who know Christ thus will have no further hope of reforming man or of improving the world. They will look beyond this world and have their minds set on things above. All their hopes will be centered in Christ. They have reached a stage of growth in which Christ is everything and in all.

(Vs. 14). Young men. The babes are marked by confidence in the Father's love. The young men do not lose this confidence, but, in addition, they are marked by spiritual strength to overcome in conflict. In the natural life the young men have to face the world and fight the battle of life. Likewise, in the spiritual life, the young men are those believers who are marked by that spiritual vigor which enables them to overcome the wicked one.

The source of their strength in overcoming is the word of God. They overcome the enemy, not by human reason or natural ability, nor by the wisdom of the schools, but by the word of God, and, further, by the word of God abiding in them. It is not simply that they grasp the meaning of the word of God, or that they have stored it in their memory, but that it forms their thoughts, holds their affections and governs their actions. For such, the word is not something that can be lightly held, or lightly given up, under the influence of a teacher. It has an abiding place in the heart as being God's word, and therefore held in faith in God. One has said, "The real secret of being able to use the Word of God against the devil is that the Word of God is keeping your own soul."

If the word of God abides in us, it will become our guide in every circumstance and our defense in every conflict. Some have looked at conscience as a guide, and thus with the greatest sincerity have been driven into the most unchristian acts, even to persecuting the saints of God, as in the case of Saul of Tarsus. Strictly, conscience is not a guide but a witness. It bears witness according to the light we have. The true light and guide is the Word of God, and, if we have that light, conscience will bear witness as to whether our walk is according to the light. Thus the Word of God becomes the test for everything. At times we may test things by their apparent usefulness or apparent success. We shall only discover the true character of anything as we submit it to the test of God's Word. To submit to the test of the Word is really to

be subject to God, and against a subject person the devil has no power. We thus overcome the wicked one.

We have the most perfect example of this overcoming in our Lord. The devil sought to move Him from the place of dependence upon God, devotedness to God, and confidence in God. In every case the Lord overcame, not by using His Godhead power, but, as the perfect, dependent Man, by using the Word of God. In each temptation the Lord overcame by saying, "It is written". Moreover, the word He used was the word He kept. It is useless to attempt to meet the devil's temptations with a word that we ourselves are not obeying. If our thoughts and words and ways are governed by the Word, we can use it effectually against the devil and overcome.

(Vs. 15). The young men may come into conflict with the devil and into contact with the world. As the flesh is still in us, the world is a very real danger. We are sent into the world as witnesses for Christ, but we are not of the world. We are therefore warned not to love the world, nor the things in the world. Further, we are reminded that, "If any one love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." We may, alas, be tempted by it, or in an unguarded moment be overcome by it, but the testing question is, Do we love it? A solemn word for all who profess to be of the family of God and yet appear to be more at home in the company of the world than amongst the people of God.

(Vs. 16). The apostle leaves us in no doubt as to the character of the world of which he speaks. He does not refer to the physical world of nature, but to that great system built up by fallen man, which is marked by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

It has been noticed that these three principles came in with the fall of man. The devil tempted Eve with the question, "Yea, hath God said?" Had the word of God been abiding in her heart, she could have used it to overcome the devil. Alas! it did not govern her thoughts, so, when quoting it (or misquoting it), she was not only powerless to overcome, but she fell into the snare of world principles. She "saw that the tree was good for food", and thus was carried away by the lust of the flesh. Moreover, she saw that "it was pleasant to the eyes", and was thus attracted by the lust of the eyes. Lastly, she saw that it was "a tree to be desired to make one wise", and the pride of life that craves for knowledge was awakened. Being carried away by the principles of the world, Adam disobeyed God and was driven from the garden. The world, then, is a vast system organized by fallen man in order to indulge the different lusts of the flesh, to gratify the eye, and to minister to the various forms of pride.

In this world there is nothing that is of the Father, and there is no love for the Father. To the believer, the Father has opened another world which is marked, not by lust that seeks its own gratification, but by love that seeks the good of its object. It is not a world that seeks to gratify the sight, but where Christ is the all-satisfying Object—"We see Jesus." It is not a world marked by the pride that boasts in its own wisdom, but it is one that is characterized by the lowliness that delights to sit as a learner at the feet of Jesus.

(Vs. 17). Moreover, man's world is passing. However fair on occasions its outward show may be, it is dominated by sin, and over all is the shadow of death. Already we have heard that the darkness, or ignorance of God, is passing; now we learn that the world that abides in darkness is also passing. In contrast with the passing world, those that do the will of God abide forever; they belong to a world on which no shadow of death will ever fall.

The Babes. We have learned from verse 13 that the first characteristic of the babes is that they "have known the Father." As they make spiritual progress they will be drawn into spiritual conflict. They will become young men and fight the good fight of faith. They will go forth to do battle for the Lord, but they start in the home circle. In that blessed circle of love, they may know little of the power of the enemy and the conflict that lies before them, but they learn the love of the Father's heart and the support of the Father's hand. It is not only that they know that they are children, and that God is their Father, but they know the Father with whom they are in relationship. They may know little of the depths of Satan, or the snares of the world, or the evil of their own hearts, but they know the heart of the Father. Once they knew nothing of the Father's heart and cared nothing for the Savior's will, but as sinners they were brought to the Savior and, through faith in Christ Jesus, they passed into the family of God, as we read, "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). The Holy Spirit was given to them, the love of God was shed abroad in their hearts, and now they can look up and say, "Abba, Father". They realize that the Father loves them with a love that never wearies and a care that never ceases.

(Vs. 18). By their inexperience the babes are more particularly in danger of being deceived. Thus the apostle warns them against antichristian seducers. We are told that it is "the last hour". As nineteen centuries have passed since these words were written, we may conclude that the apostle does not refer to the last hour as to time, but rather the last hour as to character. We know that the last hour before the judgment falls upon an apostate Christendom will be characterized by the appearance of the Antichrist. But antichristian teachers had already appeared in the days of the apostle, "whence we know that it is the last hour."

(Vs. 19). These antichristian teachers would be a special snare to believers, inasmuch as they would arise in the Christian circle and then give up the Christian profession.

(Vs. 20). To enable believers to escape all antichristian teaching, we are first reminded that we have the Holy Spirit—the Unction—and thus are able to judge of all things. In ourselves we know nothing, but having the Spirit we have the capacity for knowing all things.

(Vs. 21). Secondly, we have "the truth". The Spirit does not enlighten us by any inner imagination; He uses "the truth", and thus enables us to detect error. We do not detect the lie by occupation with evil but by knowing the truth. Our business is to be simple concerning evil and wise as to good.

(Vss. 22-23). Thirdly, having the Spirit and the truth, we at once learn that the Person of Christ is the great test of every antichristian system. We may be deceived if we judge them by the Christian terms they may use and the practice they may pursue. The real test is, How do they stand in relation to the truth as to the Person of Christ? It will be found that every false system denies in some form the truth of His Person. There are, however, two main forms of error and opposition to the truth. One form of error, mainly found among the Jews, denies that Jesus is the Christ—the Messiah that is to come. The other form of error, arising in the Christian profession, denies the truth of the Father and the Son. When the Antichrist appears he will unite the lie of the Jews with the lie that arises in the Christian profession, denying both that Jesus is the Messiah and that He is a divine Person. Today, every false system that has arisen in Christendom stands condemned by the denial of the truth of the Person of Christ as the Son, and denial of the truth of the Son will lead to the denial of the truth as to the Father.

(Vs. 24). Our safeguard against every error as to the Person of Christ is found in abiding in that which we have heard from the beginning. The Jews could say to Jesus, "who art Thou?" The Lord replied, "Even the same that I said unto you from the beginning" (John 8:25). A more accurate translation of these words is, "Altogether that which I also say to you" (N. Tn.). His words were the perfect expression of Himself. Alas! we may use words to hide what we are: He used words to express perfectly what He was. We have heard His voice and we know the truth as to Himself. We may have much to learn of the glories of His Person, but we know who He is. Any pretense of modernism, or any other false system, to give us further truth as to His Person is a denial that the full truth came out at the beginning. If that which we have heard from the beginning abides in us—if it governs our affections—we shall abide in the truth of the Son and of the Father. The sheep know His voice and are thus able to detect the many false voices of the strangers, as we read, "A stranger will they not follow... for they know not the voice of strangers."

(Vs. 25). Fourthly, we have eternal life according to promise. This life puts us in relation with divine Persons. The Lord's words are, "This is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

It is evident, then, that these antichristian teachers stand exposed as not being of us—the Christian company (verse 19); they have not the Spirit (verse 20); they know not the truth (verse 21); they deny the Father and the Son (verse 22); they have not continued in that which was from the beginning (verse 24); and they do not possess eternal life (verse 25).

The babes in Christ can escape their evil teaching by having the Spirit, the truth, the knowledge of the Father and the Son, abiding in that which they have heard from the beginning in Christ, and by living the eternal life through which they can enjoy fellowship with divine Persons.

(Vss. 26-27). These, then, are the things that the apostle writes to expose those who would lead us astray, and to warn us against them. Moreover, we have not only the written word, but also the Holy Spirit to enable us to understand the word and to test the teachings of men. Teachers may pass away, but the Holy Spirit abides. The teaching of the best of teachers may be partial, but the Holy Spirit can teach us "as to all things" (N. T n.). The teaching of the best of teachers may be at times mixed with defect, but the teaching of the Holy Spirit "is truth" and in it there "is no lie." The aim of all false teachers is to seduce the saints to give up the truth; the effect of the teaching of the Holy Spirit is to lead the saints to abide in the truth as set forth in Christ from the beginning.

The Epistles of John, 1 John 2:28-3:23: Eternal Life Manifest in Believers (3:1-23)

Having set before us the different stages of growth in the Christian life, the apostle, still keeping before us the great subject of life, presents eternal life as seen in the practice of the believer. Already the apostle has presented righteousness and love as characterizing the nature of eternal life. These traits have been perfectly expressed in Christ and are now to mark the lives of believers. Moreover, if the manifestation of these qualities is the practical proof of the possession of life, the absence of these qualities will expose all false pretension to the life.

In this fresh portion of the Epistle, the apostle first brings before us the Appearing of Christ as that which should govern our practical life (2:28-3:3).

Secondly, he presents the characteristics of the new life which distinguish the children of God from the children of the devil -righteousness and love (3:4 -16).

Thirdly, he applies these truths to the practical life of the believer (3:17-23).

(a) Practice in relation to the Appearing of Christ (2:28-3:3)

In the preceding portion of the Epistle, the apostle has looked back to that which we have heard "from the beginning". He introduces this fresh portion by looking on to the coming of the Lord.

(Vs. 28). This verse forms a connecting link with that which has gone before and the portion that follows. It sums up the preceding portion by appealing to the whole family of God in the words, "And now, children, abide in Him" (N. Tn.). The one great safeguard against the world, and the antichristian teachers of whom he has been speaking, is found in abiding in the truth as perfectly set forth in Christ "from the beginning". This, moreover, leads the apostle to look on to the coming of Christ, for it is equally important to abide in Him in order that our conduct may be consistent with His appearing. Thus the coming of Christ is brought forward to regulate and test our practice.

The apostle desires that the walk of believers may be of such a character that there will be nothing in the saints of which they will be ashamed at the coming of Christ, when at last our words and ways and walk will be made manifest "of what sort it is" and the hidden motives of hearts will be laid bare (1 Cor. 3:13; 4:5; 2 John 8). Alas! how often there is much in our words and ways and walk that we may even seek to defend or excuse, but which we should at once condemn if judged in the light of the appearing of the glory of Christ.

In the verses that follow (2:29-3:3), the apostle sets before us our privileges and the gracious provision that God has made, in order that we may walk in a way that is suitable to Christ and not be ashamed at His coming.

(Vs. 29). Firstly, the apostle shows that all right Christian conduct is traced back to the new nature that believers have received by new birth. It is the same nature that was in Christ, producing the same fruits of righteousness, thus proving that the believer is born of God.

(ch. 3:1). Secondly, the apostle reminds us that we are called into the relationship of children, and, as such, are the objects of the Father's love. It has been pointed out that every relationship has its special affection, and that it is the affection peculiar to the relationship that gives sweetness and character to it. We are called to behold this love that was perfectly expressed in Christ on earth and has been bestowed upon the believer. When Christ was here, He was the Object of the Father's love and the world's hatred. He has gone, but He has left behind those whom He has set in His own place before the Father and before the world. In His prayer the Lord could say, "Thou... hast loved them, as Thou

hast loved Me" (John 17:23). Again, the Lord could say, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you" (John 15:18). How good, then, to seek to enter into the consciousness that we are loved by the Father as Christ was loved, and are privileged to share with Christ His place of rejection by the world.

(Vs. 2). A third great truth is the blessed hope attached to the relationship in which we are set. Christ is going to appear, and when He appears, "we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is." On earth, Christ was the Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; His face was so marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men. For ourselves it doth not yet appear what we shall be, for we bear the marks of age and care and sorrow, but we look on to His appearing. For a moment the apostles saw His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, and by faith we "see Him as He is", crowned with glory and honor, and "we know" we shall be like Him, not as He was, but "as He is".

Moreover, when we are like Him, we shall see Him face to face. While we are in these bodies of humiliation, to see Him as He is would be overwhelming. The apostle John himself fell at His feet as dead when, in the Isle of Patmos, he saw the Lord in His glory. But when at last we are like Him,

How will our eyes to see His face delight,

whose love has cheered us through the darksome night!

(Vs. 3). If, then, we walk in righteousness, according to the instincts of the new nature, if, as children, we walk in the consciousness of the Father's love, if we keep apart from the world that knew not Christ, if we walk in the enjoyment of the hope that when Christ appears we shall be like Him, then, indeed, we shall not be ashamed before Him at His coming, for every man that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself, even as Christ is pure.

Our hope is in Christ, for it is only by His power that we shall at last become "like Him", as we read, "who shall transform our body of humiliation into conformity to His body of glory, according to the working of the power which He has even to subdue all things to Himself" (Phil. 3:21, N. Tn.). We cannot do without His past work to settle every question between our souls and God; we cannot do without His present work on high to maintain us day by day; we cannot do without Him to bring about the last great change; and, when in the glory, we shall need Him for all eternity. Our blessing, our joy, our all, is linked with Christ forever and ever.

Furthermore, while waiting for the last great change, the one who has this hope in Christ will become morally like Him. This hope will have a transforming effect. We are not yet pure as He is pure, but the blessed effect of this hope will be to keep us from evil and purify us according to the perfect standard of purity set forth in Him.

(b) The characteristics of the new life that mark the children of God in contrast with the children of the devil (3:4-16)

This portion of the Epistle clearly shows that the new life possessed by the children of God is manifested in a walk marked by righteousness and love, in contrast with the lawlessness and hatred that mark the children of the devil. In verses 4 to 9, the apostle speaks of righteousness in contrast with lawlessness; in verses 10 to 23, he speaks of love in contrast with hatred.

(Vs. 4). The apostle then contrasts the lawlessness of the old nature with the righteousness of the new nature that believers possess as born of God. He states that, "Every one that practices sin practices also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness" (N. Tn.). Sin is not simply transgressing a known law, as the defective translation of the Authorized Version suggests. The principle of sin is lawlessness, or doing one's own will apart altogether from any law. As another has said, "Sin is the acting without the curb of law or restraint of another's authority -acting from one's own will" (J.N.D.).

(Vs. 5). Having defined sin, the apostle immediately turns to Christ to bring before us the One in whom there "is no sin." Becoming flesh, He was entirely subject to the will of the Father. Coming into the world, He could say, "Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God" (Heb. 10:9). Passing through the world He could say, "I seek not Mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent Me" (John 5:30). Going out of the world, He could say, "Not My will, but Thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). We know, too, that it is by the will of God that believers have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb. 10:10). So the apostle can say, "He was manifested to take away our sins." In Him, then, there was no sin, or principle of lawlessness.

(Vs. 6). Partaking of this nature, and abiding in Him, we shall not sin. To abide in Christ is to see Him by faith, know Him by experience, and walk under His influence. The one that sinneth hath not seen Him, nor known Him. The apostle thus contrasts the two natures: the old nature is lawless; the new nature cannot sin. The two natures coexist in the believer; thus the apostle can say in one passage, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (ch. 1:8) and, in this passage, "whosoever sinneth hath not seen Him, neither known Him."

(Vs. 7). We are then warned against all deception. The possession of the new nature is proved, not by profession that people make, but by the way they act. "He that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous." If we partake of His life, it will show itself in a walk characterized by righteousness, even as He is righteous.

(Vs. 8). In contrast with the one that doeth righteousness and is born of God, the one that "practices sin is of the devil" (N. Tn.). Alas! through carelessness the believer may fall into sin, but the one that lives in sin shows clearly that he has the same nature as the devil, who sins from the beginning of his history. The Son of God was manifested to undo the works of the devil in order that believers, with a new nature, might come under the sway of Christ, and, abiding in Him, act in righteousness, even as He is righteous.

(Vs. 9). In contrast with the one that shows he is of the devil by practicing sin, the one that is born of God does not practice sin. There is in him a new seed—divine life—and that life which he has, as born of God, cannot sin. It is true that the flesh is in the believer; but the new nature is a sinless nature, and the believer is viewed as identified with the new nature.

(Vss. 10-11). With verse 10 the apostle passes on to speak of love. He has shown that "righteousness" in contrast with "lawlessness" distinguishes the children of God from the children of the devil. Now he shows that "love", in contrast with "hatred", is a second great characteristic of the new nature. From the beginning of the manifestation of Christ in this world, we have heard that we should love one another. Thus, as the apostle has already turned our thoughts to Christ as the One in whom righteousness was perfectly expressed (verses 5-7), so now he reminds us of the message that we have heard concerning Christ, for in Him we see the perfect setting forth of divine love.

The life of Christ reproduced in believers will lead us not only to avoid sin, but to manifest the new life by loving one another. It has been truly said, "Mere amiable nature can be found in dogs and other animals, being animal nature; but the love of the brethren is a divine motive. I love them because they are of God. I have communion in divine things with them. A man may be very unamiable naturally, and yet love the brethren with all his heart; and another may be very amiable, and have no love for them at all" (J.N.D.).

(Vs. 12). In Cain the two evil principles are set forth. Partaking of the nature of the wicked one, he hated his brother; and the root of his hatred was the lawlessness that marked his own life, in contrast with the righteousness that characterized the works of his brother.

(Vs. 13). The consciousness that Abel's works were good and his own evil stirred up a jealous hatred in the heart of Cain. We need not marvel, then, if, for the same reason, believers are hated by the world.

(Vs. 14). The world, of which Satan is the prince, is marked by lawlessness and hatred, and is in a condition of moral death. But "we", those who are believers, "know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." Love is the practical proof of divine life. We meet a child of God, who hitherto has been a perfect stranger to us, one perhaps who may be socially far above us or, on the contrary, in a much more humble sphere of life, or who may be of another land and speak a different tongue, but at once our love goes out the one to the other and we are on more intimate terms than with our relations after the flesh. The reason is simple; we have the same life -eternal life—with the same Object, Christ; we enjoy in common the same affection for Christ and the same desires after Christ.

(Vss. 15-16). The apostle then shows us the extreme expression of hatred in contrast with the greatest expression of love. Hatred, if unchecked, will lead to murder. The one who hates is in spirit a murderer, and no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

In contrast, we see in Christ the perfect expression of love, in that His love led Him to lay down His life for us. Having His perfect example before us, we should be prepared, in the power of the new life marked by love, to lay down our lives for the brethren. This does not necessarily mean actual death, but the letting go of the life here for Christ's sake (Matt. 16.25).

Thus, in the course of this passage, we are reminded that fallen man is under death, marked by lawlessness, hatred and violence. The lawless man is always self-centered, seeking only to gratify himself by doing his own will, apart from all restraint. This, of necessity, leads to the hatred of every one that thwarts his will; and hatred leads to violent acts, expressed in an extreme form by murder.

These are the evil principles that first came to light in the history of Cain and that have ever since marked the course of this world. At the outset of the history of the race, men gave up God as the center of their thoughts; they became self-centered. God having been given up, there was no bond to hold men together, with the result that they were scattered abroad. The nations into which they were divided became a center to themselves, each seeking to carry out its own will, and in consequence hating all that opposed. Thus jealousy and hatred arose among the nations, leading to violence and war.

Thus all the misery of the world can be traced to the solemn fact that man became a center to himself, independent of God, or "lawless". It is plain, then, that the whole world system is marked by these three things: lawlessness, hatred and violence.

In contrast with this world, God has brought to light an entirely new world—the world to come—of which Christ is the center, and, taking its character from Christ, it is marked by righteousness, love and self-surrender. To enter into God's new world of blessing, we must know Christ that is from the beginning. Hence the apostle insists so constantly on "that which was from the beginning" (1:1; 2:7,13-14). This expression, so characteristic of the apostle's writings, indicates that, from the moment Christ came upon this scene, there was an entirely new beginning. From that time the whole world system begins to pass away, and there comes into view that which abides. "The world is passing, and its lust, but he that does the will of God abides for eternity" (2:17, N. Tn.). Christ is the center of God's great universe of blessing. He is the Word of life, the One who has perfectly expressed God. We look at Christ and we see that God is light and God is love. But more, Christ not only brings God into the light, He also fits the believer for the light by His blood which cleanseth from all sin.

If Christ is the center of God's new world of blessing, all in that world must depend upon Him. There are three different circles of blessing, but Christ is the center of all: the Christian circle comes first; then Israel will be restored and blessed; finally the Gentile nations will come into millennial blessing. The secret of blessing for every circle will be that all are recovered from lawlessness by being brought into dependence upon Christ.

Having set forth Christ from the beginning as the great Center of God's new universe, the apostle shows how God has wrought with believers to bring them into blessing. In sovereign grace we are born of God, brought into relationship with God, loved with a love that is proper to the relationship, and, at last, we shall appear in the likeness of Christ. In the meantime, as we abide in Christ, we shall be characterized by righteousness, love and self-surrender, seen in its highest form by laying down our lives for our brethren.

(c) The practice of love and its effects (Vss.17-23)

(Vss. 17,18). The apostle concludes this portion of his Epistle with a practical application of the truths of which he has been speaking. With the flesh in us it is easy to make a profession of love in word and in tongue. Our deeds, however, will show whether our words are true. If it is in our power to help a brother whom we see to be in need, and yet decline to do so, it will be manifest that our profession of love is vain.

(Vss. 19-21). Walking in love, we shall be free and happy in our

intercourse with God. The child that is conscious of disobeying the father's wishes cannot be happy in the father's presence. If our conscience condemn us, we know that God knoweth all things. He is perfectly aware of that which we know to be wrong, and, until the wrong is confessed and judged before God, we cannot enjoy fellowship with God, nor can we have confidence in turning to Him.

Here it is no question of eternal forgiveness or salvation, for the apostle is writing to those who are forgiven and who are in the relationship of children. It is a question of being able to walk in happy liberty with God as children. To have this confidence we must so walk that our hearts do not condemn us for failing in practical love.

(Vss. 22-23). Walking in the happy confidence that we are doing those things that are right in His sight will give great liberty in turning to the Father in prayer. Keeping His commandments, we shall ask according to God's will and shall be able to count upon an answer to our prayers. If it is guidance for our path, or power to overcome some snare, or sustaining grace for a trial, we shall ask and receive from One whose power is as great as His love, and whose ear is ever open to the cry of His children.

His commandments can be summed up by faith in His Son Jesus Christ and love to one another. In the spirit of these commandments the apostle Paul could give thanks for the Colossian saints, praying with confidence for them, for he says, "We heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints" (Col. 1.4).

The Epistles of John, 1 John 3:24-5:5: Abiding in God and God in Us (5:1-5)

The apostle has presented the two great characteristics of the new nature—righteousness and love. He has exhorted us to live the practical life of love in order that we may walk in confidence before God. He now shows that a walk marked by practical love to one another and confidence before God is only possible as we abide in God and God in us. That these are the leading truths in this portion of the Epistle becomes manifest as we read the passage. In chapter 3:24 the apostle writes, "He that keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him"; in chapter 4:12, "If we love one another, God abides in us"; in verse 13, "Hereby we know that we abide in Him, and He in us"; in verse 15, "whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God"; in verse 16, "He that abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (N. Tn.).

(Vs. 24). The passage opens by bringing before us the immense privilege that God has given to the believer, whereby it is possible for him to abide in God, and God in him. If walking in obedience to God, we shall abide in Him. This surely means that we abide in the unclouded enjoyment of all that God is in His love and power and holiness, and thus walk before Him in confidence. Moreover, God by His Spirit dwells in us, so that we not only have life, but we have the power to live the life of love and communion.

(ch. 4:1-6). Before proceeding with this great theme, the apostle, in a parenthetical passage, warns us against false spirits. Such are in the world, and it is necessary to warn believers against them. We are warned of the necessity of proving the spirits by which men speak, and to beware of estimating people merely by their profession. Many who profess to be the prophets of God are in reality false prophets speaking by evil spirits. From the Lord's own words we know that a false prophet is one who has every appearance of being one of His sheep, for he comes in sheep's clothing, but inwardly he is but a ravening wolf bent on the destruction of the sheep (Matt. 7:15).

The apostle proceeds to give us three great tests whereby we can distinguish between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error:

(Vss. 2-3). Firstly, the greatest of all tests is that which concerns Christ Himself. We can test whether men speak by the Spirit of God by their attitude to Christ. The testing question is, Do they confess Jesus Christ come in flesh? They may, indeed, confess that Jesus Christ is truly a man, and a pattern man; but do they confess that He has "come in flesh", and therefore that He is a divine Person who existed before He came in flesh? Moreover, to confess Jesus Christ come in flesh is not only to confess the truth of His Person, but also personally to bow in obedience to Him as Lord. The false teacher will neither confess the truth of His Person, nor own Him as Lord, and thus proves that he is not of God and is speaking by a false spirit, the spirit of antichrist that is already abroad in the world.

(Vs. 4). When these false spirits are detected, the believer can overcome them by the Holy Spirit that dwells in him, for the Holy Spirit is greater than the spirit of antichrist that is in the world.

(Vs. 5). Secondly, we can detect false spirits by their connection with the world. Are they popular with the world? Every false spirit is of the world and speaks as of the world, and therefore in accordance with the thoughts and principles of the world. As they thus speak, the world heareth them. It is evident that nothing that is truly of God will be popular with the world, for we know that all that is in the world is not of the Father (116). Any preaching or religious book that is popular with the world will, in the measure of its popularity, stand condemned as not teaching the truth. How many religious movements of the day are at once exposed for the believer by this simple test!

(Vs. 6). Thirdly, a final test to detect the spirit of error is raised by the question, Do they accept the teaching of the apostles? The latter can say, "We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us." How many infidel critics of the day dismiss the teachings of the apostles as being merely Johannine or Pauline doctrines to be treated as the opinions of partially instructed men, and therefore to be accepted or rejected according to whether their teachings fit in with the views of these days of professed greater enlightenment.

We may indeed grow in the knowledge of the truth that has been revealed, but there can be no development or advance upon truth given by inspiration. It follows that those who reject the apostolic teaching stand utterly condemned by this solemn passage as being "not of God", for the apostle can say by inspiration, "He that is not of God heareth not us."

We can thus detect the spirit of error and the spirit of truth, and we are able to escape the false prophets, the false systems and the false spirits that are abroad in Christendom today by asking these simple questions:

What is their attitude to Christ?

Are they popular with the world?

Do they accept the apostles' teachings?

The only safeguard of the believer, who has tried the spirits and found them to be antichristian, is to treat them as evil and wholly refuse them. It has been truly said, "As soon as the demon is discerned, there is but one course—to treat the demon as a demon. If this course is adopted, he will be found powerless before the name of Jesus; but if we resort to any other way, if we yield to human considerations, if we are amiable with the agents of the enemy, we shall soon find ourselves in weakness before Satan, God not being able to be with us in the course we have chosen" (J.N.D.).

Having given us this solemn word of warning, the apostle resumes the great subject of this portion of the Epistle already brought before us in the last verse of chapter 3—abiding in God and God in us. In order that these great truths may be a practical reality to us, the apostle presents the love of God in a threefold way. Firstly, in verses 7 to 11, he speaks of the love of God toward us, settling every question of our past. Secondly, in verses 12 to 16, he presents the love of God in us, governing our present life of testimony. Thirdly, in verses 17 to 19, he speaks of the love of God with us, in view of the future.

(Vss. 7-8). The love of God toward us. In the enjoyment of this new life, the apostle addresses believers as "Beloved", and he says, "Let us love one another." In order to draw out our love toward one another, he reminds us of what God is and what God has done. God is love, and God has acted in love toward us. Thus there is a twofold motive for loving one another. Firstly, the very nature of God is love, and, being born of God, we partake of His nature. By loving one another, we give a practical proof that we are born of God and know God. If we have no love for the brethren, it would prove that we are strangers to God.

(Vss. 9-10). "The love of God toward us" is a second great motive for love to one another. We have not only a statement that God is love, however true, but we have the manifestation of God's love toward us. In our unregenerate days we were dead to God and in our sins. In order that we might live and have our sins forgiven, God manifested His love toward us by sending "His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him" and, further, He "sent His Son a propitiation for our sins."

(Vs. 11). If, then, God has thus manifested His love toward us, we, who are born of God, "ought also to love one another." This love to the brethren is not mere natural affection, which can be found even in the brute beasts. It is love flowing from the possession of the divine nature, a love that was manifested toward us when we were dead and yet in our sins. It is therefore a love that can rise above all evil and anything that I may detect to be wrong in a brother. I love him, not because of what he is, but because of the nature I possess, which is love. The thought has been expressed that I ought to rise above all that is disagreeable and untoward in my brother, because God loved me when I was as untoward as possible.

(Vss. 12-13). The love of God in us. Having spoken of the love of God toward us, the apostle passes on to speak of the love of God that has been "perfected in us." With this is connected the great truth of the Spirit which has been given to us. This is more than having a new nature, for the Spirit is a divine Person. "No one has seen God at any time"; but we know that "the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him." The Holy Spirit makes good to our souls the declaration of God by the Son, for He bears witness to Christ, brings to our remembrance what Christ has said, and takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto us (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:14). The very perfection of love, the greatest privilege that love can confer, is that "we abide in Him and He in us."

(Vs. 14). Moreover, if the Spirit of God testifies of Christ and the love of God declared in Christ, the result of receiving this testimony will be that believers will testify to the world that "the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world." The Lord could say to His disciples that "the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, He shall testify of Me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with Me from the beginning" (John 15:26-27).

The love of God toward us, and the new nature in us, which is love, will lead us in the power of the Spirit to love one another and to render a testimony to the world that the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.

(Vss. 15-16). Furthermore, we know that the Spirit of God dwells in us, not simply by the experiences that He gives us, but by the word we are assured of His presence in every believer, for we read, "whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God." Alas! we may at times live so carelessly that we have no consciousness of God being in us by His Spirit. We may grieve the Spirit into silence so that we have little enjoyment of the love that God has toward us. If we walk in the power of an ungrieved Spirit, we shall know and believe the love that God has to us and, abiding in love, we shall abide in God and God in us.

(Vss. 17-19). The love of God with us. Having spoken of the love of God "perfected in us", the Apostle now speaks of the love "perfected with us" (N. Tn.). The apostle writes thus in view of the future, the day of judgment. The love of God removes all fear as to the future by bringing us to see that as Christ is, so are we in this world. As believers we are as clear from our sins and the judgment they deserve as Christ Himself. When we appear before the judgment seat of Christ, we shall have our glorified bodies and be like Him; but, even now, while we are yet in this world, we are as clear from our sins as He is. Our righteousness before God is set forth in Christ in the glory. We have not to look in at our own hearts to see if we are clear of judgment; we look up at Christ and see that He is so clear of all our sins and judgment, which He bore on the cross, that He is in the glory.

Thus perfect love casts out fear. Delivered from the fear of torment, we are made perfect in love, our love being drawn out by this great love to us: "We love Him, because He first loved us."

(Vss. 20-21). Having spoken of our love to God, the apostle immediately gives us a test to prove the reality of love to God. For one to say that he loves God, while at the same time he hates his brother, would prove him to be a liar. We have not seen God actually, but we can see something of God in our brother, and, if the qualities of God in the saints do not draw out our affection, it is obvious that we do not love God.

It is God's will that "he who loveth God love his brother also."

(ch. 5:1-5). Furthermore, we are left in no doubt as to who is our brother, for the apostle proceeds to give us the marks of one that belongs to the family of God.

Firstly, our brother is one that is proved to be born of God inasmuch as he believes that Jesus is the Christ.

Secondly, being born of God, he is one who loves God and all who are begotten of God, the children of God.

Thirdly, loving God, he keeps the commandments of God, and they are not grievous, for His great commandment is to love our brother.

Fourthly, the one born of God overcomes the world by faith. As born of God, we are no longer of this world, as the Lord could say, "Ye are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." We belong to another world of which Christ is the center, and in faith we look on to that world and rise above the present evil world.

Fifthly, the faith that overcomes the world is a faith which has Christ for its object—we believe that "Jesus is the Son of God."

The Epistles of John, 1 John 5:6-12: The Witnesses to the Son (5:6-12)

Before closing his Epistle, the apostle presents a threefold witness to the Son of God, the One through whom eternal life has been communicated to believers. There is the witness of the water, the witness of the blood, and the witness of the Spirit.

(Vs. 6). Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world by incarnation, but, in order to bless sinners and impart to believers eternal life, He had to come by water and blood. In other words He had to die.

His life of infinite perfection exposed our condition and revealed our need, but could not meet that need or impart to us eternal life.

Apart from His death He would forever have been alone, according to His own words, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (John 12:24).

The water and the blood that flowed from the wounded side of a dead Christ both witness to His death, and they set forth two great results of His death. The water witnesses to the judgment of death pronounced and executed on the flesh, whereby the believer is cleansed from the old nature. We are crucified with Christ, and, participating in the life of Christ risen, we reckon ourselves dead with Him to the old man that is governed by sin. We are thus purified from the old nature. Further, He comes to us by blood. By His death we are not only purified from the old man, but we are justified from our sins by His blood. Moreover, on the ground of His death and resurrection, the Holy Ghost has been given to bear witness to us of Christ and the efficacy of His death.

(Vss. 7-8). Passing over verse 7, which is an admitted interpolation, we have the three witnesses again presented, but now in the order of their testimony on earth. In verse 6 we have had the historical order in which the Holy Ghost came after the death of Christ. When it is a question of testimony to us, the Holy Spirit is first mentioned, for it is by the Spirit that we receive the testimony of the death of Christ and appreciate the value of the water and the blood. These three, the Spirit, the water and the blood, unite in one testimony to the Son and the efficacy of His work, and the blessing of eternal life that comes to the believer through that work.

(Vss. 9-10). In these verses the apostle reminds us that the witness to these great truths is "of God". If we receive the witness of men, how much more should we receive the witness of God to His Son. The one that believes has, by the Spirit, a witness in himself to the truth of God. As God has thus given an adequate witness concerning His Son, it follows that "he that believeth not God hath made Him a liar."

(Vss. 11-12). All these great truths—the death of Christ and the presence of the Spirit in the believer—witness to the fact that God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. It is in us as a gift; it is in Him as a source. Apart from the Son there can be no life before God. To have the Son is to have received the truth and to have the Son before us as the Object of our faith. He that is in ignorance of the Son, or rejects the truth, has not the Son of God and "hath not life."

The Epistles of John, 1 John 5:13-21: Confidence in God (5:13-21)

The Epistle closes with an expression of the confidence in God that is the practical outcome of being established in the truth of eternal life. The effort of antichristian teachers and false prophets, against whom the apostle warns believers, is to shake the believer's confidence in God. The great end of the apostle's teaching is to confirm believers in the truth and thus establish their confidence in God, enabling them to resist those who would lead them astray.

It will be noticed in these closing verses that this confidence in God is kept before us by the repeated use of the expressions, "ye know" and "we know" (verses 13,15,18-19 and 20).

(Vs. 13). Seducers had attempted from the beginning to turn believers from the truth presented in Christ, to link the saints with the world, and weaken the teaching of the apostles by calling in question their authority. The tendency of these false teachers would be to rob the saints of the knowledge and enjoyment of their privileges. To counteract these false influences, the apostle writes his Epistle to those that "believe on the name of the Son of God", that they may "know" that they have eternal life.

(Vss. 14-15). This confidence in God finds its expression in prayer in the every-day life—"If we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us." And if we know that He hears us, we also "know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him." He, according to His perfect love and wisdom, reserves to Himself to answer our petitions in His own time and way. In the confidence in God that is the outcome of the new life, it is our privilege to make known our petitions to God, but not to dictate to God as to His answer. He may see fit to keep us waiting, but in the meantime we have the consolation of knowing that He listens to everything that we ask that is in accordance with His will.

(Vss. 16-17). Furthermore, this confidence in God leads us not only to pray for ourselves, but also to intercede for others. Many a sickness that comes upon the people of God is by no means a chastisement for sin, but, as in the case of Lazarus, for the glory of God (John 11:4). Nevertheless, there is the governmental dealing of God with His people, and, if we see a brother chastened of God by some sickness because of a particular sin, we can intercede for such an one, provided that the sin is not unto death.

All unrighteousness is sin and carries its governmental consequences, but these consequences may not always be unto death. Whether the sin is unto death or not depends upon the particular circumstances. Many a believer may have been led into telling a lie without coming under the severe chastisement of death; but in the case of Ananias and Sapphira the lie was aggravated by the circumstances and became a sin unto death.

(Vs. 18). In spite of all that deceivers may say to the contrary, "we know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not." We know that as born of God we have a new life, and that new life is perfect and cannot be touched by the wicked one. So the Lord can say of His sheep, "I give them life eternal; and they shall never perish, and no one shall seize them out of My hand" (John 10:28, N. Tn.). Living the life of the new man we shall not sin, nor shall we be troubled by the wicked one.

(Vs. 19). Further, having a new life, we know that we are of God, and that we can thus distinguish between those who are born of God and the world around that lieth in the wicked one (N. Tn.). Living in the power of the new life, we not only escape the wicked one but are delivered from the world.

(Vs. 20). The apostle confirms our confidence in God by summing up the great truths of the Epistle. We know that the Son of God is come. With this great truth the Epistle opens. Having come, He has given us a full understanding—as being the full revelation of God—that we may know Him that is true. Thus the Epistle goes on to tell us that the message we have heard of the Son is that God is light and God is love. Moreover, we have learned that through the gift of eternal life and the Spirit, "we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ." This blessed Person with whom we are linked "is the true God, and eternal life." He is a divine Person in whom the eternal life has been perfectly expressed.

(Vs. 21). Finally, we are reminded that everything that would come in between our souls and God to hinder the enjoyment of the life that is the great theme of the Epistle is morally an idol. The whole Epistle would encourage us to live the life we have and thus be preserved from idols.

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