

1 John Chapter 3 Exegetical Notes

1 Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.

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idete - “behold” with an emphasis on astonishment

Burdick sees chapter 3 as composing part of John’s second cycle whereby the Christian life is seen in terms of its divine sonship. This cycle starts in 2:29 and continues through 4:6 (chapter divisions are not inspired by the Holy Spirit). The basis principle is stated in 2:29, and is this, “a son will exhibit the characteristics of the Father.” If we are truly children of God, then our lives of necessity must bear that out.

In verses 1-3 of this chapter, we see the privilege of divine sonship. John introduces this with the word idete, which emphasises astonishment. He is really saying, “Wow, take a look at this! We are children of God! Can you believe it?”

This sonship is entered into by way of the new birth. We are children (*teknia*) of God by the new birth. Because of our new family, we are not recognized by the world. We are reminded of Christ’s words in John 15:18-21:

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me.

We are despised and hated by the world simply because the world does not know us, or know God.

Note that the source of this sonship is not us, it is God. John says in John 1:13:

Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

It is God, and God alone, that has chosen to bestow his love on us with the result that we become children of God.

2 Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

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Not only is divine sonship a present reality, as seen in verse one, but it is a future hope. The present reality is only a shadowy portent of things to come. We are now the sons of God, but the complete reality of what that means awaits a future fulfillment which he (Christ) appears. At that time we will be like him, for we shall see him even as he is now.

What will we be like when we see Christ?

1. We will be perfected with a new, glorified body - 1 Corinthians 15:51ff, Philippians 3:20-21.
2. We will receive our divine inheritance - 1 Peter 1:3-4.
3. We will be perfect - Hebrews 12:22, Revelation 21:27.

The process of sanctification, began in this life (Philippians 1:6), will reach its completion in that day.

3 And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.

But what about the present? Some people think that just because they are going to be perfected some day gives them the license to live a dissolute and undisciplined life now. Not so! Just because someday we will be perfected does not mean we can live as we want to now.

Why Grow Spiritually?

1. Growth Glorifies God.
2. Growth Verifies Regeneration.
3. Growth Adorns the Truth.
4. Growth Grants Assurance of Salvation.
5. Growth Protects the Cause of Christ from Reproach.
6. Growth Produces Joy and Usefulness in One's Life
7. Growth Enhances Our Witness to a Lost World

4 Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.

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In the next five verses we find three reasons why the son of God is to live a pure life. Remember, the basis of John's argument is that we are sons of God, as a result, our lives need to manifest the character of God.

The first reason we are to live godly lives is that sin is **incompatible with our sonship**. The verbs in this verse are in the present tense, and hence denotes continuous action. Those who

practice sin , practice lawlessness (*anomia*). Thus, by their very lives, they show that they have no sense of responsibility to their “Father” to live according to his law.

John actually equates lawlessness with sin. Ultimately, all sin is a violation of God’s law. R. C. Sproul has aptly defined sin as “cosmic treason.”

5 And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin.

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The second reason we are to live godly lives is that Christ was **manifested to take away our sin**. We see this in the next three verses. What John is intimating is the idea that why should a person who claims to be a son of God practice that which required the death of Christ to erase?

This is a very powerful argument against sin. We need to realize that the very reason Christ came to die on the cross was to take away our sins (John 1:29). If that is true, and it is, why should we want to commit sin in defiance of his love? It is inconsistent with our sonship.

6 Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.

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John stresses this point by another statement that has caused great difficulty for many Christians. Some use this verse to teach that those who sin lose their salvation, but again, the verbs are in the present tense. John is not saying that those who commit sin (an act) do not know Christ, but those who live a life of sin (continual practice) that do not know Christ.

The black and white nature of this argument is because John is talking about regeneration. Those who are truly regenerate do not abide in a constant state of continual sin. They may sin, but as we have already seen in 2:2 we have an advocate when we do. Additionally, a true believer is one who confesses their sin as seen in 1:9.

John strikes at the heart of the gnostic heresy by talking about those who see and know Christ. The gnostics believed they knew Christ, but by their very lives of sin they showed that they not only have not seen Christ, but they do not know him either.

7 Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous.

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John now turns from the audience in general, to the audience in particular, true believers. He warns the true believers to beware lest someone lead them astray. The word for deceive, *planao*, refers to wandering off. We get “planet” from it. John is warning the true believer not to be led astray in believing that someone can know Christ while at the same time living a life of sin and rebellion. They are mutually exclusive. On the other hand, one who does righteousness exhibits by their life that they are truly sons of God.

8 He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.

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The third reason we need to live godly lives as sons of God is that **those who do not lead godly lives are of the devil**. John is contrasting families here, the family of God and the family of Satan. The verb is again in the present tense which indicates continual action. Those who continually and habitually live in sin are of the devil.

We are reminded of Christ's words in John 8:44 when he told the rejecting Pharisees that they were "of their father the devil." Those who reject Christ and live in sin exhibit the character of their "father", satan.

John gives a second reason Christ came. Not only did he come to take away our sins, but he came to destroy the works of the devil. Why would a Christian want to be caught up in doing those things that Christ came into the world to destroy?

9 Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

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John wraps up his discussion by reiterating his point, those who are truly born of God do not continually practice sin, and in fact, cannot continually practice sin. Why? It is because sin is contrary to their nature.

We read in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that those who are in Christ are new creations. At the moment of salvation God does a divine work in our lives by transforming our natures into ones that are holy. The divine seed is implanted within us. That does not mean that we do not sin, because we are still incarcerated in unredeemed flesh, but it does mean that we have a new capacity to live holy lives.

10 In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother.

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This then is the distinguishing mark of sons of God. One can differentiate between children of God and children of satan by observing their lives. Those who evidence unrighteousness and a life of habitual sin and lawlessness prove their heredity far better than a mere DNA test.

In the last half of this verse John goes on to another characteristic of sons of God, and that is love for other members of the family. To claim sonship with God and yet hate other sons of God is an impossibility.

11 For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

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Why is love for one another so important? It is because it is a message we have heard from the beginning. The best understanding of “beginning” is the same as that of 2:1, which is the beginning of one’s Christian experience.

It is possible that John has in mind Christ’s commandment in John 13:34-35:

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

12 Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.

John illustrates his point with two negative examples. The first is Cain, who slew Abel (literally, “cut his throat”) because his works were evil and his brother's good. One of the things that brings the wrath of the world upon the believer is that the believer by their righteous lifestyle expose the sin of unbelievers. This is what Christ said in John 15:22ff.

Note that Cain evidenced that he was a member of the devil’s family (*ponarou* - evil one) by his act of murder. Christ said in John 8:44 that the devil is a liar and murderer from the beginning (of creation).

13 Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.

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The second negative example is that of the world. John reminds his readers that the world hates them because they are not of the world. Note Christ’s words in John 15:18ff. Because we are not of the world, we are hated by the world. This should not come as a surprise to us, nor should we be bothered by it. It should be a cause for rejoicing since it shows whose side we are on.

14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

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John now turns from the negative to the positive in the next two verses. How do we know that we have passed from death to life, it is because we love the brethren. This does not mean we will always feel giddy about other Christians, or that we will necessarily even like them, but it does mean that we will sacrifice ourselves and our desires for others.

John emphasizes this by categorically stating that anyone who hates his brother abides (present tense) in death.

15 Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.

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Why is it that love for fellow believers is so important? It is because those who hate others are murderers. We are reminded of Christ's statement on the Sermon on the Mount in which he equates hatred with murder (Matthew 5:21-26). The reason for this is that hatred precedes murder. Since God looks on the heart, and not just our external actions, a heart filled with hate is the same in God's sight as the act of murder.

John's strong statement regarding the fact that no murderer has eternal life in him causes some difficulty. What John is saying again is that one is a murderer as a way of life, as evidenced by their hatred of other believers. It is not the *act* of murder, but the *life* of murder that is in view here.

16 Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

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John now turns to how one's love for one's brother is evidenced. It is one thing to claim to love one's brother, and another thing to act kindly towards one's brother, but how does one truly know that they in fact love their brother?

The **first test of love for another is to lay one's life down on their behalf**. How did Christ show his love towards us? He died for us. It would have done us no good eternally for Christ to have sat in heaven and claimed his love for his. That love had to have expression, and the expression that he gave was his sacrifice for us.

Christ is our divine example of love. Just as he gladly and freely gave his life for us, even so we should give our lives for our brothers.

17 But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?

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The **second way we exhibit our love for the brethren is that we become involved in meeting their physical needs**. To claim to love someone while that person is suffering deprivation, and we have the means to meet that need, is to show our utter lack of love.

John is not talking about the withholding of goods from those who have squandered their wealth, or from those who refuse to engage in gainful employment (Paul talks about this in 2 Thessalonians 3), but he is talking about those who have a legitimate need and cannot provide for themselves. Christianity is not a commune, it is a community.

Interestingly, John equates the desire to meet the needs of others with the nature of the believer. It is natural for a Christian to want to help others and be of assistance. Those who can look upon suffering and experience no compassion lack the love of God in them, and most likely are not believers.

18 My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.

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John ends this section by exhorting his readers not to love in word and tongue, but in deed and truth. It is not what we say that matters, but what we do.

Note that the deeds of love are to be done sincerely. Someone can be kind to others as a sham, or to get something in return. The love of the Christian is a pure love that does not seek its own, but the welfare of the recipient.

19 And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.

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In the next six verses John gives us the fruits of love. The **first of these is assurance**. The assurance of our salvation and sonship is that we are obedient and exhibit sincere love to others. Because of this, God bears witness with our hearts that we truly belong to him.

It is important to note that in the New Testament assurance of salvation is a work of God in our hearts. We are never called upon to convince ourselves or someone else that we are true believers.

20 For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.

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The text of this verse can be confusing. The basic idea here is that even when our heart condemns us because we feel that we do not measure up, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things. Even when we may feel condemned by our heart, God can assure us because he knows that we are truly his.

21 Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.

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The second fruit of love is assurance, or confidence, that our prayers will be answered. Confidence, *parrhesia*, refers to a boldness of speech that one has. Our boldness of speech before God is not based on ourselves, but on the new life we have within us as a result of our sonship.

Note further that this boldness is not a rash boldness, or an inappropriate brashness before God, but a settled conviction that since we are his sons he will hear us.

22 And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.

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How does God hear us? He hears us by answering our prayers.

Note that God answers our prayers because we are his sons, and because we are doing those things that are pleasing in his sight. In context, John is referring to our love towards our brothers and our righteous acts of obedience as sons of God. If we live in sin and rebellion, we cannot expect God to answer our prayers.

The verbs here are in the present tense and denote continuous action. We habitually keep his commandments, and we habitually do those things that are pleasing to God. It is a lifestyle, not a hit-and-miss activity.

23 And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.

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What is God's commandment to us? It is that we should believe on Christ and love one another. These are not optional aspects of the Christian life. The first is required to become a son of God, the second evidences our lives as sons of God.

The verb tense for believe is in the aorist tense and denotes point action, our initial act of faith in Christ. The verb for love is in the present tense and denotes a pattern of life. The commandment to love one another is not doubt referring to Christ's commandment in John 13:34-35.

24 And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.

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John reiterates Christ's statements in John 14-15 when Christ told the disciples that they would exhibit their love for Christ by keeping his commandments. If they did keep his commandments, Christ would dwell in them, and they in Christ.

The phrase "and hereby" comes from the Greek word *en*, which means instrumentality. The instrumental, or way in which we know that God abides in us, is our obedience and the assurance of the Holy Spirit which he has given to us. This is not something arrived at using purely logical means, rather it is a work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.