

November 15, 2015 by Steve Brandon



The Righteous Test

1 John 3:4-10

1. Are You Practicing Righteousness?

2. Are You Practicing Sin?

In recent days our youngest two children, Stephanie and David, have discovered the Bean Boozled Jelly Beans. These are a set of Jelly Belly jelly beans that come in pairs. These pairs look alike. But they sure don't taste alike.

For instance, there are some dark brown jelly beans. Some of them taste like chocolate pudding. And some of them taste like canned dog food. There are some black jelly beans. Some of them taste like black licorice. And some of them taste like skunk spray. There are some yellow and white jelly beans. Some of them taste like buttered popcorn. And some of them taste like rotten egg.

And you don't know which one they are until you taste them. So, if you hold one of these in your hands, you know that tasting it will either be a pleasant experience or it will be an awful experience.

Jelly Belly has marketed these jelly beans in the form of a game. You spin the spinner to determine which sort of jelly bean pair you have to taste. Then, you taste them. And the result may be pleasant, or it may be not so pleasant. The result? Well, my kids and the Kids KLUB kids took the challenge.

This illustrates our text this morning. Just as the jelly beans were either good tasting or bad tasting, there's not this middle ground. There is not a flavor that might taste good to some and bad to others. Rotten egg tastes bad to everyone.

So in our text this morning we will see the world divided into two sorts of people. There are the children of God. There are the children of the devil. And like our jelly beans, there's no middle ground. You can't be sort of a child of God.

Any middle ground is because we lack the discernment of the heart. But, in God's eyes, there is no doubt at all. You are either in the kingdom. Or, you are not in the kingdom. You are either a child of God. Or, you are a child of the devil.

Today we will begin in 1 John 3:3. The text we are looking at today is really at the heart of this epistle. As I have said many times before, the purpose of this letter comes in chapter 5 and verse 13.

1 John 5:13

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

John wrote the letter for those who had believed in Jesus. He wanted them to know that they indeed had eternal life. And it wasn't my simply telling them that they had eternal life. Rather, it was by giving some tangible ways for them to discern that they indeed were believers. And thus, that they had eternal life. And as I read the text, I want for you to listen for the characteristics of those who believe and for the characteristics of those who don't believe.

1 John 3:4-10.

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. 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. 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, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

The best place to begin in this text is at the end. Verse 10, ...

1 John 3:10

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: ...

When the children in the video tasted their jelly beans, there was little doubt as to whether they had a fine-tasting jelly bean or a sour-tasting jelly bean. They could tell by their taste buds, and we could see it on their faces.

Now, when it comes to the children of God and the children of the devil, it should be just as evident. Or, as the New American Standard translation says, "they are obvious." ...

1 John 3:10 (NASB)

... the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious:

You ask, "How can you tell?" Well, John continues, ...

1 John 3:10

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, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

You can tell the difference by observation. You look and see what sort of life one is living. Profession of faith is a good thing. In fact, it is required to enter the kingdom of God. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). And this is where every child of God begins his journey. By believing in the son of God. And by confessing your belief.

But, when it comes to understanding whether or not your confession was real, John says, "look at your life." Again, verse 10, ...

1 John 3:10

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, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

John gives two ways to know. If you don't "practice righteousness," you are not of God. If you don't "love your brother," you are not of God. Our text this morning covers the idea of "practicing righteousness." Our text next time covers the idea of "loving your brother." Verses 11-18 all speak about how a genuine believer will genuinely love others.

Thus, my title this morning is, "The righteous test." The idea is exactly what verse 10 says, ...

1 John 3:10

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,

This is my first point.

1. Are You Practicing Righteousness?

If you look at your life and you see that you aren't "practicing righteousness," then you may well be assured that you are not a child of God. Or, to put it positively, let's look at verse 7.

1 John 3:7

Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.

Practicing righteousness is the theme of our text this morning. You are either practicing righteousness (verse 7). Or, you are not practicing righteousness (verse 10). And as you look at your life, you can test yourself. You can see whether you are practicing righteousness or you are not. And discerning the practice of your life will be a way for you to know whether or not you are believing in Jesus Christ or not.

Because a believer will practice righteousness. And an unbeliever won't. This was John's point in chapter 2 and verse 29, ...

1 John 2:29

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

Practicing righteousness is a fruit of being born again. It doesn't merit anything before God. It doesn't earn your way to heaven. Practicing righteousness is an evidence of whether or not you are indeed a child of God.

And so, the question naturally comes up, "what does this mean?" Well, at the most basic level, it means, "doing what is right," as opposed to doing what is wrong. In other words, is your life filled with doing right? Or, is your life filled with doing what is wrong?

Now, what's interesting about saying these things is that almost everyone will say, "Well, I do what's right." "Right?" This shows the validity of Proverbs 21:2. "Every man's way is right in his own eyes,"

But, when I say that "practicing righteousness" is "doing what is right," I'm not talking about "right in your eyes." I'm talking about "right in the eyes of the Lord." Listen carefully to how Proverbs 21:2 ends. "Every man's way is right in his own eyes, But the Lord weighs the heart" (Proverbs 21:2).

In other words, everyone thinks that they are doing right. But, when God weighs the heart, he finds something else. He finds a heart that isn't doing right.

Think with me about the Pharisees. One could argue that these men were the most righteous men in human history. They devoted themselves to studying God's law. They devoted themselves to doing what was right. And yet, Jesus told them that their hearts were evil. He said this, ...

Matthew 23:25-28

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

So, when I say that righteousness is about doing what is right, I'm talking about right with your life and right with your heart. From the inside out, not merely external. The heart that is right before God will seek his ways. And the heart that is not right will seek its own ways. Are You Practicing Righteousness?

If someone would come and examine your life, what would they see? Would they see someone who is seeking to walk in the right ways of God?

Let's look at my second point. My first question to you is this: Are You Practicing Righteousness? Here's my second point, ...

2. Are You Practicing Sin?

This is really the opposite of the first question. The opposite of righteousness is sin. The first question had to do with doing right. This second question has to do with doing wrong.

And throughout this passage, John makes some statements about those who practice sinning. Those who practice sinning fail "the righteous test." Look at verse 4.

1 John 3:4

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.

Here we see the standard for righteous behavior. It's not what you think is right. It's what God says is right.

God has given us a law. God has given us his word. God has instructed us in the way that we should live. And any deviation from that is sin. As John says, "Sin is lawlessness." That is, sin is going against the law. Sin is living contrary to what God has said in his word. And so, as you look at your life, what's your pattern?

Are You Practicing Sin? Are you submitting your life to God's ways? Or, are you living life your way? Because, the pattern of your life will tell you about your relationship with Christ. Look at verse 6, ...

1 John 3:6

No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.

Listen to the New American Standard:

1 John 3:6 (NASB)

No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.

This is the best literal translation of this verse. "No one who abides in Him sins." The reason why the ESV (and NIV) add the words, "keeps on," (as in "no one who abides in him keeps on sinning"), is because you might easily come to the conclusion in verse 6 that a Christian is one who has obtained sinless perfection. He no longer sins!

However, this would contradict the Bible, as James says, "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man" (James 3:2). And there was only one perfect man -- Jesus Christ. We all have sinned. And we all sin.

But, more importantly for understanding this verse, saying that a Christian no longer sins would contradict John. Do you remember back in chapter 1? John was talking about sin. He says (in verse 8), ...

1 John 1:8

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

And so, if you contend that a Christian doesn't sin, because of chapter 3 and verse 6, well then you have misunderstood John. For he has said that we do sin. And that we are to confess our sins (1:9).

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So, chapter 3 and verse 6 isn't telling us that a Christian is perfect. Rather, the idea is that caught well in the English Standard Version.

1 John 3:6

No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.

And this, is a totally legitimate way to translate the Greek present tense. Because, in the Greek language, the present tense doesn't focus like our present tense does on when an action takes place (like our English does). Instead, the present tense in Greek emphasizes the continual action. It's the idea of continual practice. Do you "keep on" sinning? That's why I asked the question this way: Are You Practicing Sin?

You might easily put it this way: are there sins in your life that you hold dear? That is, you simply can't and won't give these sins up. They are your practice.

See, it's one thing to sin and hate your sin and strive against your sin. But, it's another thing to sin and love it and strive to keep it. And that's the difference here. The one who loves his sin is "practicing sin." And the one who hates his sin and works to avoid his sin isn't "practicing sin."

And that's why I ask: Are You Practicing Sin? Look now at what verse 6 says about sinning and relationship with God.

1 John 3:6

No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.

If unrepentant sin is your habit, then you are not abiding in him. If unrepentant sin is your habit, then you haven't seen him or known him. In other words, you are not a Christian. You are not born again. This is exactly what verse 9 says.

1 John 3:9

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.

Here's the reality. When someone is "born of God," he has been changed. He is different than he was before he was "born of God." And that change has an impact upon his life. Where once his life was filled with sin and selfishness, now a new desire has been given to him. He has a desire to walk in righteousness. And, a new ability has been given to him. It's the power to overcome sin.

And where does this power come from? It comes from God. Look over in chapter 5 and verse 18.

1 John 5:18

We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.

You could rightly translate this, "We know that no one who is born of God [keeps on] sinning; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him." This is the good news of the gospel. Not only does our faith in Jesus forgive us our sins. But, our faith in Jesus also empowers us over our sins. Because, Jesus enters our life and keeps us and protects us. So we can overcome the world and its temptations.

Look again at chapter 5 and verses 3 and 4.

1 John 5:3-4

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

When it comes to faith in Jesus Christ, a sign of being "born of God," is a righteous life. Are you born again? Have you come to faith in Christ? Have you come to know victory over sin? Or, Are You Practicing Sin? Because, the reality is this -- when Jesus Christ came to the earth, he abolished sin. Or, more precisely, he "took away sins." Verse 5, ...

1 John 3:5

You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.

See, when Jesus Christ came, he came to remove sin from us. He came to remove us from sin's power and domain.

Do you remember what John the Baptist said? He pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). That is, Jesus removes our sin from us. He doesn't just make it clean. He actually takes it away.

As the hymn-writer said, ...

My sin -- O the bliss of this glorious thought! --
my sin, not in part, but the whole,
is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more;
praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

The allusion is to Colossians 2:13-14, "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."

This is what separates God from man. When we deal with the sins of other, we forgive others, which means that we agree to overlook the sin. I have forgiven you. I will forget about it. I won't bring it up again. I won't hold it against you. In some ways, we bury it under the rug; out of sight out of mind.

But, God, in his dealing with our sin, is different. He actually removes our sin from us. He takes it away. He no longer brings it up in charge against us, because the evidence has been destroyed! Our sins have been taken away.

And the only way that this could be done is through a sinless savior. It could never take place through the Old Testament sacrifices. This is what the writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 10.

Hebrews 10:1-2

For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins

But, the good news is this -- that Jesus took away our sins! And the implication is this: since Jesus took away our sins, they no longer have power over us. That's why a genuine believer will not keep on sinning (verse 6).

And the evil one will not touch a genuine believer. Why? Because Jesus came to destroy his works. Verse 8, ...

1 John 3:8

... The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

Sin and temptation and the devil no longer have mastery over the believer in Christ. Because Jesus has stripped the devil of his power. Jesus has destroyed his works. That's why a believer will practice righteousness. That's why a believer will not practice sin.

So, what about you? Are You Practicing Righteousness? Are You Practicing Sin? Do you pass the righteousness test? Are you a child of God? Are you a child of the devil (verse 10)? Are you are following the Lord. Or are you following in your own ways.

And I trust that for most of you, you have seen God work in your life. And you know how your desires are godward! You want to live for him! And as you look at your life, you see a measure of righteousness, which is encouraging.

In fact, among those to whom John wrote, most passed the test. He was writing to those who believed in the name of the son of God (5:13). And several times throughout this epistle, John is giving assurance to his readers that they are indeed children of God. "Beloved, we are God's children now" (1 John 3:2). "Little children, you are from God and have overcome them" (1 John 4:4). "We know that we are from God" (1 John 5:19).

But, the fact that you are here this morning doesn't mean that all is automatically well with you. You may well be here and fail the righteous test. And if you do, this also is good news, because it gives you an opportunity to repent. There are many who think that they are right with God and have no need of repentance. But, if you see that you fail the righteous test, then you are in a good place. Because, you see clearly and aren't deluded. And I call you today to repent and trust in Christ, and see him work in your to desire righteousness and to hate sin.

Now, before I close, I want to give you a second place of application this morning. And it has to do with others. I want for you to use this test on those you know who profess to be a Christian. If indeed, you see that they pass the test of righteousness, then deal with them as fellow believers. But, if you see that they don't pass the test of righteousness, then deal with them as unbelievers, and point them to Jesus.

Now, in doing this, you must be careful. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, ...

Matthew 7:1-5

"Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

There are some who will take these verses and say that you shouldn't judge other people (i.e. 7:1). But, they fail to take verse 6 into account.

Matthew 7:6

"Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

You need to determine who are swine and who are dogs. And if they are swine, you don't give them what is holy. This requires some judgment. This requires some discernment. Jesus warns against judging others, because your standard will come back to you. And if you have rightly evaluated yourself with my two questions (Are You Practicing Righteousness? Are You Practicing Sin?), then you can apply these to others. You can evaluate to see whether you should cast your pearls before them or not. But, in looking at others, I have intentionally drawn us all through a long look at ourselves first.

We don't want to be dealing with a speck in our brother's eye, when we have a log in our own. But, it's important to take others through this test. Because, there are many who fail the test who don't themselves think that they fail the test. And we should tell them.

For instance, my daughter has some friends who are in college right now. One of her friends was recently engaged. But my daughter and many of her friends have doubts about the guy. They have doubts as to whether he is a believer or not. And they think that he is bad news. This girl has been approached by several of her friends who have expressed doubts about him and about their relationship. Although she has patiently listened to these concerns, she has rejected the counsel of her peers. So, she has continued on her ways.

They planned to be married in the summer. But now she is pregnant (which demonstrates a bit of what was going on in this relationship). And now things are very difficult for this girl. She has shed many tears. She has said how difficult life is.

This passage would be a perfect passage to bring to her attention. She might demonstrate some signs of being a Christian. After all, she has been involved with a Christian group on campus and has attended church consistently with the crowd. And she would certainly claim to be a Christian. But her actions are telling people something that is far different than her words.

With all gentleness, here are some questions that might be asked of this girl: Are you practicing righteousness? Are you practicing sin? Which side are you on? Are you really a child of God? Perhaps you need to repent.

This is very difficult and can cause some splits in relationship. I remember confronting a man of this fact, and the rift between us lasted a decade. It's hard. But when you don't see things line up in the lives of people, it's necessary to approach them with an understanding that they need the gospel. Because, I fear too often, believers in Christ are all too ready to accept anyone's testimony without taking their lives into account.

But, the call of this passage is for discernment.

1 John 3:7-8a

Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.

The church in America has a huge discernment problem. I can't tell you how many times I have heard people talk about their childhood "conversion," only to confess that they had little love for Jesus. Instead, they have lived a life of sin. But the church gives assurance that these children are indeed believers (despite what their life is saying).

How many people boast about the big meeting that was held where a dozen people prayed to receive Jesus. If this passage teaches us anything, it teaches us that such a prayer is wonderful. However, it also teaches us that the genuineness of this prayer takes a bit of time, when we can witness a change in their lives, from sin unto righteousness.

When have you ever read a missionary letter that boasts of the fifteen that prayed to received Jesus a year ago and continues to explain that only three of them have continued with the Lord? When have you received a letter that rejoices in the three that were saved in that meeting? Most today will rejoice in the fifteen! Do you realize that we are rejoicing in the Lord's work in the souls of twelve who are going to hell?

When someone prays a prayer, that's wonderful! But this passage teaches us this the prayer isn't what we ought to look for in discerning the child of God. We should look at their lives and wait to see if God is working before we get overly excited at the "conversion" of others. And when they show a godward focus away from sin and toward righteousness, let us rejoice!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on November 15, 2015 by Steve Brandon.
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