

1 JN. 2:28 – 3:24

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VII. 2:28 - 3:24 – The ethical component of abiding in Christ

A. Abiding involves right living (2:28 - 3:10)

1. Right living and Christ's second coming (2:28 - 3:3) – ²⁸*And now, little children, remain in him so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.* ²⁹*If you know that he is righteous, you know that also everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.* ³ *See what kind of love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and we are. On account of this the world does not know us, because it did not know him.* ²*Beloved, we now are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.* ³*And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as that one is pure.*

a. ²⁸*And now, little children, remain in him so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming* – John amplifies on the significance of "remaining," a word he used in 2:27. It is the difference between confidence and shame at Christ's second coming. If they will remain in Christ, following the teaching they heard from the beginning, then when Christ appears to judge, they may be confident and unashamed before him.

b. ²⁹*If you know that he is righteous, you know that also everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him*

(1) Since God is righteous, those who share that characteristic are the ones who have been born of him; they are his sons and daughters. The obvious implication is that the false teachers are not. Burge explains (p. 145):

When we exhibit God's righteous character, we show that we are born of him, just as a child might show the features of his or her parents. Knowing God and his righteous character fully leads to its imitation. But it does not work the other way around. Doing righteousness is not a precondition for being born of him, nor is it the means to divine birth. As Stott says, "A person's righteousness is thus the evidence of his new birth, not the cause or condition of it."

(2) That "he" refers to God the Father is clear from the fact that in the nine other uses in 1 John of the verb "to give birth to" (*gennaō*) God the Father is the only one by whom those concerned are brought to birth.

(3) John is writing to and about Christians, baptized believers, and his "everyone" must be understood in that context. He's certainly not saying that people who "practice righteousness" in the imperfect sense he means (or else no one qualifies) but who deny the truth about Christ or have not been baptized have been born of God.

c. ^{1a}*See what kind of love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and we are* – John directly affirms that he and his readers are God's children and marvels at God's love in making them so. God himself has brought us into his family!

d. ^{1b}*On account of this the world does not know us, because it did not know him* – He explains the lack of recognition his readers have received by the false teachers on the basis that the world did not know Jesus. (The "him" probably refers to Jesus "because in 1 John it is always Jesus Christ come in the flesh whose true identity is in question [2:22-23; 4:2-3; 5:1, 5, 10], never that of the Father." Kruse, 115.) John wrote in Jn. 1:10 that Jesus "was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him." Since the false teachers are of the world (4:5), it should not be surprising that they do not recognize Jesus' disciples.

e. ²*Beloved, we now are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*

(1) The full story of our final state or condition as children of God has not yet been made known. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 2:9 (NIV), "However, as it is written: 'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived-- these things God has prepared for those who love him.'" But we do know that when Jesus returns we "will be like him." Note that this was something John's readers knew, something that was part of general Christian knowledge.

(2) At Christ's second coming, we will be like him in that our bodies will be changed to be like his glorious and immortal body (1 Cor. 15:50-55; Phil. 3:20-21; see also, Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:13-17) and the sanctification that began at our conversion, our transformation into Christlikeness (2 Cor. 3:18), will be brought to completion. We then will be fully "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). We will be physically and spiritually prepared for eternity in the immediate presence of God Almighty.

(3) This transformation will in some sense be effected by our seeing Jesus "as he is," seeing him in his returning glory as the King of kings and Lord of lords. Thomas Johnson writes (NIBC, 68-69), "There will be a transforming vision at the return of Jesus in which believers will be purified of all that still separates them from complete likeness to Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18)."

f. ³And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as that one is pure – All who have this hope in Christ of ultimate transformation into his likeness strive to live righteously (to purify themselves morally) in the present, the implication being that the false teachers have no such hope.

2. Right living and Christ's first coming (3:4-10) – ⁴Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; indeed, sin is lawlessness. ⁵And you know that that one was manifested so that he might take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶Everyone who abides in him does not sin [habitually]; everyone who sins [habitually] has not seen him nor has he known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as that one is righteous. ⁸The one who practices sin is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this [reason] the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. ⁹Everyone who has been born of God does not practice sin because God's seed abides in him, and he is not able to sin [habitually] because he has been born of God. ¹⁰By this it is evident [who are] the children of God and the children of the devil: everyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, including the one who does not love his brother.

a. ⁴Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; indeed, sin is lawlessness.

(1) Sin is not something to be taken lightly; it is "lawlessness." And it is "lawlessness" for everyone who commits it; there are no exceptions for the spiritual elite.

(2) John's emphasis in using "lawlessness" is on opposition to God or rebellion against him (implicit in lawbreaking), rather than simply on lawbreaking. You see this flavor of the word in Paul's reference to the "man of lawlessness" in 2 Thess. 2:3, the one who stands in direct opposition to Christ at his second coming. It's like saying, in a context of military conflict where some are downplaying the seriousness of disobeying war laws (e.g., blackouts, rationing), "Everyone who disobeys commits treason; in fact, disobedience is treason."

(3) He stresses the seriousness of sin for all who commit it to counter the claim of the false teachers that sin is of little if any consequence to the enlightened and to show clearly the necessity that it be renounced by the children of God.

b. ⁵And you know that that one was manifested so that he might take away sins, and in him there is no sin.

(1) They know that Jesus came to take away sins by atoning for them and thus making forgiveness available. That is the heart of the gospel they had received in the beginning.

(2) But as Marshall notes (p. 177), John is not simply assuring them that Christ has provided forgiveness of sins; he is indicating Jesus' opposition

to sin by the fact he took sins away. Jesus' opposition to sin is further indicated by his own lack of sin – "in him there is no sin." As John has already said, Jesus is the "righteous one" (2:1) and "is pure" (3:3). Jesus is totally opposed to sin; he is the unique Son of God and God is light, the one in whom there is no darkness at all (1:5-6).

c. ⁶*Everyone who abides in him does not sin [habitually]; everyone who sins [habitually] has not seen him nor has he known him.*

(1) Since sin and Christ are at complete odds with each other, no one who abides in Christ can be at peace with sin. Taken at face value, John's words could mean that Christians do not sin at all, but we know that cannot be his meaning. 1 John 1:8, 10 leave no doubt that John thought all Christians sin. In numerous other verses he urges his readers not to sin but to practice righteousness (2:1, 15, 29; 3:12, 18; 5:21) thus demonstrating he knew it was possible for Christians to sin.

(2) That's why I have added "habitually" in brackets. The word "habitually" is not in the text, but with many others I'm convinced that is how the present tense verb "sin" should be understood in this context. The present tense can express the continuous nature of an action. The NIV and ESV adopt that sense here by translating it "keeps on sinning."

(3) The thought parallels 1:5-6 which employ the verb "walking." This gives the flavor of a pattern of life or course of conduct, as opposed to sporadic and uncharacteristic occurrences. John is emphasizing that ongoing, habitual sin has no place in the believer's life. The idea of coexisting with sin fits the setting of this letter in that the false teachers urged that sin was of little or no consequence.

(4) Commenting on 3:4-9, Stott writes (p. 139-140):

[T]he sin a Christian 'does not' and 'cannot' do is habitual and persistent sin. He may sin sometimes, even with the consent of the mind and the will, but he is overwhelmed by grief and repentance afterwards (Ps. 51). For the whole direction of his life is towards God and holiness. His mind is set on the Spirit (Rom. 8:6) and on the things above (Col. 3:2), not on earthly things (Phil. 3:19). His eyes are ever focused on the Lord (Ps. 25:15), whom he sets always before him ((Ps. 16:8). His eyes are fixed on all God's commands (Ps. 119:6, RSV); his heart is steadfast also (Ps. 57:7). 'Although the believer sometimes sins, yet not sin, but opposition to sin, is the ruling principle of his life' (Plummer). His whole life is one of 'truceless antagonism to sin' (Law). The 'seed' within the believer's spirit 'fills it with an irreconcilable hate against every sin, and urges it to an unceasing conflict against all unrighteousness' (Alford). It is not that Christians are 'wholly free from all vice' but that they 'heartily strive to form their lives in obedience to God' (Calvin). 'Sin does not reign in them', for the Spirit 'does not let it flourish' (Calvin).

d. ⁷*Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as that one is righteous.*

(1) John urges his children not to be deceived by the false teachers' claim that one can be righteous without bothering to live righteously. As he said earlier, fellowship with God cannot be divorced from walking in the light (1:5-7), knowing God cannot be divorced from keeping his commandments (2:4-6), and being in the light cannot be divorced from loving the faithful (2:9-11).

(2) The truth of the matter is that it is the believer who lives righteously, albeit imperfectly, who is the true believer and thus who by grace is righteous as Jesus is righteous, that is, perfectly. Alternatively, it may be that the false teachers called themselves "righteous" in a sense different from living righteously (e.g., belonging to the divine sphere) and John here says that it is those who practice righteousness who are righteous, which practical righteousness emulates (albeit imperfectly) that of Christ.

e. ⁸*The one who practices sin is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this [reason] the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.*

(1) John reinforces his exhortation that they not be deceived by those pushing the lie that one can be righteous while embracing sin. He says that the one who accepts sin, who is involved in it in an ongoing way (present tense), is of the devil in the sense the devil has been sinning from the start of human history. That is his *modus operandi*. One who lives sinfully shows the family likeness. He may claim to be of God but the truth is that he is of the devil. He can be recognized by his fruits (Mat. 7:20).

(2) The very reason Jesus came was to destroy the works of the devil; they are implacable foes. So the one who cooperates with the devil by accepting his enticement to turn from doing God's will and by encouraging others to do so by yawning at the practice of sin cannot be on the side of Christ.

f. ⁹*Everyone who has been born of God does not practice sin because his seed abides in him, and he is not able to sin [habitually] because he has been born of God.*

(1) No Christian peacefully coexists with sin because, having been born of God, God's "seed" remains in him. This "seed" is the divine agency for begetting and maintaining God's children.

(2) As for the specific identification of this divine agency, the choice between God's word and the Holy Spirit is once again (see 2:27 – anointing) difficult to make. As noted previously, we probably make too much of a distinction between the two.

(a) Smalley states (p. 173-174):

In our view, the most satisfactory exegesis of this passage is one which brings together the two concepts of "word" and "Spirit," and explains the expression *sperma autou* ["his seed"] against a Jewish, as well as Christian background. In the OT the ability to renounce sin evidently derives from the word (or law) of God as it indwells the hearts of the faithful (note Ps 119:11, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you"; cf. also Ps 37:31; and see further Sir 24:22-23; 1 QS 4:20-23). According to the prophets, the coming messianic age was to be characterized especially by the "cleansing" of believers, in whom abide the law (word) and Spirit of God (Jer 31:33-34; Ezek 36:25-27).

Against such a background, with which John would have been familiar, we may now understand *sperma* ["seed"] to mean the word of God which is received in faith by the Christian, and which (through the inward activity of the Spirit) leads to rebirth, and the experience of increasing holiness by living in Jesus. . . . Such an interpretation harmonizes with John's allusion to the *chrisma* ("anointing") which indwells the believer (2:20, 27), since in our view this term also refers to the word of God received into the hearts of the faithful and activated fruitfully by the Spirit.

(b) Similarly, Marshall states (p. 186-187), "The Spirit is operative in the preaching of the Word which produces the new birth in the hearts of those who hear it and respond in faith (1 Thess. 1:5ff). As a result of the continuing presence of the Word in the believer's heart through the Spirit he cannot sin."

g. ¹⁰*By this it is evident [who are] the children of God and the children of the devil: everyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, including the one who does not love his brother.*

(1) Given that those born of God do not live in sin, do not sin as a matter of course or habit, a criterion for recognizing the children of God and the children of the devil is whether they practice righteousness. They are recognized by their fruits (Mat. 7:20).

(2) Of course, this statement must be understood in the context of the letter. The issue John is addressing is whether professing Christians, baptized believers who now deny the need to practice righteousness (i.e., the false teachers and their followers), are indeed children of God. So his words cannot be taken to mean that a diligent pursuit of righteousness by one who is not a baptized believer marks one as a child of God.

(3) In the last clause, John specifies that the practice of righteousness that marks one as a child of God includes loving other Christians. (I take *kai* in the sense "including"; see, e.g., Mat. 8:33; Lk. 23:49.) The mention of this key failure of the false teachers and their followers sets the stage for the comments that follow.

B. Abiding involves loving one another (3:11-24)

1. Importance of loving one another (3:11-15) – ¹¹*For this is the message which we heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, ¹²not like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And [for] what reason did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil but the ones of his brother [were] righteous. ¹³Do not be amazed, brothers, if the world hates you. ¹⁴We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brothers. The one who does not love abides in death. ¹⁵Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that every murderer does not have eternal life abiding in him.*

a. ¹¹*For this is the message which we heard from the beginning, that we should love one another* – The command to love one another was part of their foundational ethical instruction, something that was passed on to them when they first heard the gospel.

b. ¹²*not like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And [for] what reason did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil but the ones of his brother [were] righteous* – This implies that not loving one's brother would make one like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother (this is made explicit in 3:15). Cain's sin was prompted by spiritual jealousy; his own deeds were evil (giving an unacceptable offering) but Abel's were righteous (giving an acceptable offering) (see Gen. 4:1-7).

c. ¹³*Do not be amazed, brothers, if the world hates you* – In light of that precedent, they should not be surprised that the world, which includes the false teachers (4:5), hates (which is murderous in principle – Mat. 5:21-22) them. After all, their lives are righteous but the lives of those in the world are evil.

d. ¹⁴*We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brothers. The one who does not love abides in death* – The command to love is so fundamental that it can serve as a test for salvation (i.e., as a test for the presence of saving faith). The presence of love attests to the genuineness of his and his reader's faith, and hence attests to their passage from death to life. The absence of love in the lives of the false teachers proves that they abide in death.

e. ¹⁵*Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that every murderer does not have eternal life abiding in him* – All who hate (do not love) a brother or sister are murderers, and no one who lives as a murderer has eternal life. On the contrary, they abide in death, as he just stated.

2. Love involves action (3:16-18) – ¹⁶*In this we have known love, that that one laid down his life on our behalf; and we ought to lay down the lives [of us] on behalf of the brothers. ¹⁷But whoever has the goods of the world and sees his brother having need and closes his innards to him, how [does] the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or tongue but in action and truth.*

a. ¹⁶*In this we have known love, that that one laid down his life on our behalf; and we ought to lay down the lives [of us] on behalf of the brothers – Jesus showed the way of love, what it means to love, by giving up his own life to benefit others (see Jn. 15:13). Love means the readiness to sacrifice, even lay down our lives, for the benefit of other people. This is how we are to love one another!*

b. ¹⁷*But whoever has the goods of the world and sees his brother having need and closes his innards to him, how [does] the love of God abide in him?*

(1) Marshall comments (p. 194-195):

Readiness to lay down one's life is a high ideal, to which we may enthusiastically consent: it is a fairly remote possibility, and, if it did arise, we would probably make the supreme effort that would be required. Meanwhile, however, we are content to live our present comfortable life until that supreme sacrifice is demanded. No, says John, the moment is here now. If you have the means of livelihood in the world – and everybody who can afford to buy this book comes into this category – *and* you see a brother in want, *and* you show no pity to him, then the love of God cannot possibly be in you. . . . Christian love is love which gives to those in need, and so long as we have, while our brothers have little or nothing, and we do nothing to help them, we are lacking in the love which is the essential evidence that we are truly children of God.

(2) Listen to what Aristides, a Christian in Athens, wrote to Emperor Hadrian around A.D. 125 (*Early Christians Speak*, 207):

They [Christians] love one another. They do not overlook the widow, and they save the orphan. He who has ministers ungrudgingly to him who does not have. When they see strangers, they take him under their own roof and rejoice over him as a true brother, for they do not call themselves brothers according to the flesh but according to the soul. And whenever they see one of their poor has died, each one of them according to his ability contributes ungrudgingly and they bury him. And if they hear that some are condemned or imprisoned on account of the name of their Lord, they contribute for those condemned and send to them what they need, and if it is possible, they redeem them. And if there is any that is a slave or a poor man, they fast two or three days and what they were going to set before themselves they send to them, considering themselves to give good cheer even as they were called to good cheer.

c. ¹⁸*Little children, let us not love in word or tongue but in action and truth – We must render true love, love that involves deeds not merely talk. As James wrote in Jas. 2:15-16: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacking daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' but you do not give to them what is necessary for the body, what good is it?"*

3. Reassurance from loving one another (3:19-24) – ¹⁹*By this we will know that we are of the truth and will reassure our heart before him* ²⁰*whenever our heart condemns us, for God is greater than our heart and knows everything.* ²¹*Beloved, if our* heart does not condemn [us] we have confidence before God,* ²²*and we receive from him whatever we ask because we keep his commandments and practice the things [that are] pleasing before him.* ²³*And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he gave commandment to us.* ²⁴*The one who keeps his commandments abides in him and he in him. And in this we know that he abides in us, from the Spirit whom he gave to us.*

a. ¹⁹*By this we will know that we are of the truth and will reassure our heart before him* ²⁰*whenever our heart condemns us, for God is greater than our heart and knows everything.*

(1) "By this" refers to the example of faithful living John has just mentioned, to loving the brothers and sisters in deeds and not merely words. By living that way, we will know that we are of the truth. This parallels what he said in 2:3 (*And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments*).

(2) And that knowledge that we are of the truth will reassure or pacify our hearts before God whenever our hearts condemn us (for sins we commit). The reason that knowledge will pacify our hearts whenever they condemn us is that the God, to whom we know we belong because we are of the truth, is greater than our condemning heart (in the sense he is more merciful) and knows everything (including the fact we belong to him - see 2 Tim. 2:19). In other words, the fruit of our faith testifies that we are God's children – that is the implication of being "of the truth" – and to be God's child is to have peace despite our sin because of the nature of God, because of his mercy and omniscience.

b. ²¹*Beloved, if our* heart does not condemn [us] we have confidence before God* – This reassurance or pacification of our condemning heart generates confidence before God, the confidence of a son before a father, which expresses itself in making requests of him.

c. ²²*and we receive from him whatever we ask because we keep his commandments and practice the things [that are] pleasing before him*

(1) Faithfulness or covenant loyalty is a requirement to being heard by God. As the Psalmist wrote, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Ps. 66:18). That is why James said "The prayer of a *righteous* man is powerful and effective" (Jas. 5:16b; see also, Ps. 34:15; Prov. 15:29; Isa. 59:1-2; 1 Pet. 3:12; 1 Jn. 3:21-22). We will not be living sinlessly, but we must be living righteously, meaning genuinely and not hypocritically. This is not the only condition of effective prayer, but it is the one John wants to stress at this juncture (because of the false teachers' de-emphasis on obedience).

(2) To be effective, prayer also must be: according to God's will (1 Jn. 5:14; Jn. 15:7), which dovetails with the requirement that it be in Christ's name (Jn. 16:23-24); with proper motives, meaning out of a sincere heart rather than "to be seen by men" (e.g., Mat. 6:5-6); from a desire to glorify God rather than to indulge our selfishness (Jas. 4:3); by one who forgives others (Mk. 11:25; see also, Mat. 6:12-15); and by one who believes God's promises (Mt. 21:22; Mk. 11:24). See Stott, 153.

d. ²³*And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he gave commandment to us.*

(1) The commandment (singular) of God has two parts: to believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and to love one another. These form a unity, making explicit what John has assumed all along about the indispensability of faith.

(2) As David Rensberger remarks (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, 106), by "believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ" John "means maintaining the full incarnational Christology that the opponents have called into question."

(3) The love component of this singular commandment encompasses a multitude of duties. The fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Mat. 7:12, 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10), but some specific conduct is loving and other conduct is not. Love is the center, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. As Paul indicates in Rom. 13:9, the command to love your neighbor as yourself encompasses the commands of the law not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, and not to covet (and other commands he does not specify). So the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic law, that set of commands that are part of Mosaic covenant, upholds the transcendent moral requirements that are included in that law (e.g., Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 10:14; Eph. 6:2). It is this ongoing moral law centered in love that is the "law of Christ." (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2 with 5:14).

e. ²⁴*The one who keeps his commandments abides in him and he in him. And in this we know that he abides in us, from the Spirit whom he gave to us*

(1) All who keep God's commandments (plural), which are subsets of or are encompassed by "the commandment" of faith and loving one another, abide in him and he abides in them. The implication is that those who do not keep God's commandments do not abide in him nor does he abide in them.

(a) Stott writes (p. 154) that abiding in God "is not a mystical experience which anyone may claim; its indispensable accompaniments are the confession of Jesus as the Son of God come in the flesh, and a consistent life of holiness and love."

(b) Marshall states (p. 202):

It is noteworthy that in 2:6 we were told that the person who lives in him ought to walk as Jesus did. Now we are told that the person who obeys his commands lives in him. Later we shall read that if we love one another, God lives in us (4:12). It would seem to follow that obeying God's commands is not so much the condition of living in him, as rather the expression of our spiritual life; yet this expression may fail to appear, with the result that our spiritual life is in jeopardy, and therefore we can be commanded to obey God's commands. Spiritual life and obedience are thus two sides of the one coin.

(2) The consequences of abiding have been spelled out elsewhere, e.g., 2:24-25 (eternal life), 28 (confidence at second coming).

(3) John says in v. 24b that he and his readers know that God abides in them from (or by) the Spirit God gave to them, but he does not explain how the Spirit they received produces that knowledge. I think he means that they know God dwells in them because his Spirit dwells in them and they know his Spirit dwells in them because, unlike the false teachers, they confess the truth about Jesus (4:2-3, 6) and exhibit Christlike behavior (2:28, 3:9). In other words, the Spirit confirms his presence in certain ways, and by his confirmed presence they know God abides in them. Smalley writes (p. 212):

John's criterion of spiritual confidence – "we can be sure that he lives in us by (*ek*) the Spirit he has given us" – may seem too "inward" and subjective after the practical teaching of vv 16-23. However, the Spirit, according to John, manifests himself objectively in the life and conduct of the believer, inspiring true confession of Jesus (4:1-3) and enabling his followers to act righteously (cf. 2:29) and lovingly (cf. 4:12-13; . . .). Obedience is both the condition and expression of dwelling in God (v 24a); and the creative gift of the Spirit provides us with factual evidence of that abiding (cf. Stott, 151).