

Week 5: John and Jude: Children of God

Hook

TRUE FAITH

Main Point: Children of God act as Jesus did.

There is an old Jewish legend that speaks of two brothers who each inherit half of their father's farm. One of the two brothers had a wife and children to look after. The other brother was single. Both brothers were farmers and began working their half of the farm that was given to them.

One night, the brother who was single found himself unable to fall asleep. He couldn't shake his conscience, which kept reminding him that his brother had a wife and children to feed, while he was making away with half the yield of crops even though he only needed to feed himself. So he arose from the bed in the middle of the night and gathered some of the crops and grains he farmed that day and brought them to his brother's barn across the farm.

As it would happen, the other brother – the husband and father – was also unable to fall asleep that night. He could not shake the funny feeling of knowing that he had a wife and children that would one day go on to take care of him into his old age, while his brother would have no one to look after him at all. To help his brother earn a more comfortable wage from the yield of his crops, the married brother decided to get up in the middle of the night to gather some of his own yield to bring to his brother.

Night after night, both brothers faithfully rose in the dead of night to take provisions to the other, not ever knowing what the other was up to. Each morning they would both wake up to find that their own provisions from the day before had somehow been replenished. Until one night, both brothers ran into each other on the way to the others' barn. They dropped their sacks of provisions and hugged each other as they both wept.

The power of this story is in the way both brothers loved each other self-sacrificially and made decisions to act in a way that we recognize as the character of Christ.¹

Describe the person in your life who looks a lot like Jesus. What makes that person like Jesus?

What in your life looks like Jesus? What in your life needs to look more like Jesus?

RECAP: Last week, John directly confronted the false teachers that had been infiltrating these churches, calling them “antichrists” because they denied that Christ was the way to the Father. John reminded his readers of the original Gospel they had heard, that Christ is the only way to the Father and eternal life in His kingdom. Now that John had established that these false teachers were anti-Christ (meaning “against Christ”) and therefore not in fellowship with the Father, he circles back to the same argument he made earlier in the letter, that children of God love others because God is love.

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Book

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1 John 3:1–3; John 1:9–13 and John 15:18–23 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Because we are children of God, we will be like Him.

Q: How does being “children” of God affect us and define us?

Q: Why did Jesus tell His disciples they would have conflict with the world?

In the last section, John clearly established that the false teachers were antichrists and therefore not in fellowship with the Father, because Christ is the only way to the Father. Now John circles back to what he described earlier in the letter, that because we are in fellowship with God through Christ, and because God is love, then our lives will also be defined by love.

He opens verse 1 with “Behold!” In the ESV it’s “see,” but in the original Greek, it’s an imperative statement commanding the people to stop and reflect on how great God’s love is that He has adopted us as His children. The Greek word translated “what kind of” love is a unique word used only seven times in the New Testament, always with a sense of astonishment or wonder. The word literally means “from what country?” God’s love for us is so astonishing that it’s otherworldly. It’s so astonishing it should make us stop and wonder, “How could God love us this much? It’s so incredible!”²

What makes this love so astonishing? That He has called us His children. This is not only about our salvation, but about our relationship. Our salvation is not just about what we have been saved from but what we have been saved for – new life in Christ! We have been born again, not of the flesh but of the Spirit (John 1:12–13; 3:8). Being born of the Spirit makes us children of God, a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). As children of God, born of the Spirit, we have a new identity in Him. The father/child imagery emphasizes that just as children look and act like their human parents, so, too, will those who have been born of the Spirit look and act like their heavenly Father.

John said this is why the world doesn’t know us. He explained in the introduction to his Gospel that when Jesus came, even though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He even came to His own people, Israel, and they didn’t receive Him (John 1:10–11). Again, John was drawing a solid line between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. Those who are still of the kingdom of darkness are children of the Devil, the father of darkness. They don’t know us because they don’t know our Father. The biblical “knowing” doesn’t only mean knowing about someone; it also can mean knowing someone personally – relationship, fellowship. Because they are not in fellowship with God, they are also not in fellowship with us, His children.

In the same way that children typically grow up to become like their parents, as God's children, we are growing to become like Him (Ephesians 4:15–16). We are not there yet, and we will not be fully like Him ("pure") until Christ comes again and the kingdom of God comes in all its fullness (1 John 3:2–3). We have been made new creations in Christ, but we will not be made perfect until the final kingdom of God when He makes all things new (1 Corinthians 15:51–54; 2 Corinthians 5:1–5).

Not until Jesus comes again will we be made pure/holy/perfect. But John told us that everyone who has this resurrection hope in Jesus will also "purify himself" in this life. Purity comes from the Holy Spirit. We are sanctified (made holy) by the power of the Holy Spirit, not our own power. Yet we also have a role to play in our sanctification, to pursue holiness by pursuing God, abiding in Christ, studying God's Word, and practicing spiritual disciplines. This doesn't mean we make ourselves holy, but we pursue habits and practices that keep us connected to God so He can do His purifying work in our lives. It's kind of like an electrical outlet. The Holy Spirit is the power source, but we can't access His power unless we plug ourselves in. This is how we "purify ourselves," but with the power of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Peter 1:22).³

Q: Reflect for a moment on God's love for you. How is it astonishing?

Q: Why should children of God want to pursue holiness? How have your desires changed since you became a believer?

Q: What spiritual practices and disciplines have you found most helpful to growing in spiritual maturity and holiness?

1 John 3:4–10 and John 8:39–47 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Children of God don't live in habitual sin.

Q: Why is it important that John used phrases like "keeps on sinning" and "makes a practice of sinning" when describing children of the Devil versus children of God?

Q: Why does love for others characterize the children of God?

John created a very simple distinction between children of God and children of the Devil. He did not split hairs or sugar-coat the situation. Those who continue to "make a practice" of sinning cannot be children of God. They must be children of the Devil. This doesn't mean that anyone who ever commits any kind of sin is a child of the Devil. That would be all of us. Because, as John had just written, though we have been regenerated (created new), we will not be made completely pure/perfect until Christ comes again. We will all still sin until Jesus returns and we are made perfect in the consummated kingdom of God.

John means that those who abide in habitual sin (as we abide in Christ) are children of the Devil. John used the phrase "makes a practice of sinning" to distinguish between

believers who sometimes commit sins and people who are in the habitual practice of sinning without remorse or desire to do what pleases God. That is the dividing line. A child of God will commit sins at times, but a child of the Devil walks in sin as a way of life, intentionally rebelling against what God says is right.

John's categories are simple and logical. There is no sin in Jesus. Therefore, anyone who makes a practice of sinning does not know Him or abide in Him. Those who abide in Jesus practice righteousness.

The reason John cited that believers cannot "make a practice of sinning" – not just *don't* but *cannot* – is because they have been born of God. Sin is no longer in their nature. It's not who they are anymore. The new birth is such a radical change in our very nature that for those who have been born again, sin is no longer natural. Because of the fall, sin is part of human nature; we are born into it. But when we are born again, born of the Spirit, we are born into righteousness. Sin becomes unnatural.⁴

John's categories are so clear and simple that he concluded "it is evident" who are children of God and who are children of the Devil. This isn't something we have to wonder about; our lifestyles make it clear. The two things that make it evident are 1) practicing righteousness – doing what God says is right, not whatever you think is right or what you want, and 2) loving other people. This points us right back to what Jesus said is the basis of all the commandments, loving God and loving others.

This is the basic, foundational truth of our faith. And yet, it can be a hard thing to hear in our culture, in which people tend to do what "feels right" to them rather than defining what is right by God's definitions in Scripture. Calling those who choose not to follow Jesus "children of the Devil" sounds harsh in our pluralistic society where we're taught that all views should be equally valued. But for John, there are clear right and wrong sides. There are only two divisions of people: children of God and children of the Devil. There is no gray area.

In our world, unbelievers may consider this kind of attitude "judgmental" or "holier than thou." But John's desire was simply to help these believers see the truth so they could protect themselves from false teachers (1 John 2:26) and be assured of their salvation in Christ (1 John 5:13). He was not afraid to speak hard truths to do so. Because the truth isn't about condemning people, it's about setting them free (John 8:32).

Q: Why is it important for the Church to be clear about what sin is? Why is this especially hard in our current culture?

Q: If you knew someone who was living in habitual, unrepentant sin but didn't realize it because the culture has said it's OK, how could you talk to that person in a way that is not condemning but loving and desiring to help set them free with the truth?

1 John 3:11–18; John 13:12–15 and John 15:9–13 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Real love shows itself in action.

Q: How did Jesus show us what love really looks like?

In the beginning of the letter, John wrote to his readers, “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Now, He repeated “this is the message,” but it’s the message “you have heard from the beginning” (1 John 3:11) – even long before Christ, from the very beginning of creation, way back in Genesis. Love has always been the command.

To prove that this message was from all the way back at the beginning, John referred to Cain and Abel, the children of the very first couple. These two are a clear example of the two distinct categories John described. Cain was “of the Evil One” and Abel was a righteous child of God. It wasn’t just that Cain was a murderer; it was also the reason he murdered his brother – because his own deeds were evil and his brother was righteous. This further highlights the war between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. The darkness hates the light and wants to destroy it.⁵

So, John wrote, don’t be surprised that the world hates you. Jesus told His disciples that the world hated Him first, so of course they would also hate His people. Don’t be surprised when the world wants to destroy you – when you feel attacked, when life feels like constant spiritual warfare. This is the reality of being a child of God living in the kingdom of darkness. We are children of the kingdom living in enemy territory.

But even though the world hates us, as children of God, followers of Jesus, we are called to love. Because we have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, we are not part of this world of hate. John again used strong language to make a clear distinction between these two kingdoms and two types of people. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, hating someone is like murdering them, so hating others is abiding in death, not abiding in Christ who is life (Matthew 5:21–26).

Those who know Jesus will practice love because God is love. He doesn’t just love people, He is love. So if we have God’s Spirit dwelling in us, we will love. It’s really that simple. Jesus showed us the ultimate example of love when He laid down His life for us (John 15:13; Romans 5:8). When He washed their feet, Jesus showed His disciples that His love is a self-sacrificing, humble servant kind of love (John 13:12–15). John told his readers that those who follow Jesus ought to love the way He did.

John realized that many of us will never be in a position to literally die for others, so he gave another more day-to-day example of a tangible expression of self-sacrificial love, helping the needy. What is significant is the way John describes it. Not that the person doesn’t help the one in need, but that he “closes his heart against him,” reminding us that the condition of our heart is always God’s true concern (1 Samuel 16:7). The contrast John created is between heart and action, between what we say and what we

actually do, because our actions reveal what is truly in our hearts. Actions speak louder than words.

This is only one example of how we can love others in a tangible, Christlike way, but there are thousands of others. It's not just about helping the poor. John was saying that if we truly love God, then we will have the heart of God for other people. And that heart will show itself in action, in the way we treat other people. If we are truly followers of Jesus, we will live in such a way that we "lay down our lives" for others. Not necessarily in dying for them but in being a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1–2). We will sacrifice our time, money and whatever other resources we must serve those in need, whether physically, spiritually or emotionally.

Q: How do you know that "actions speak louder than words" is true from experiences in your own life?

Q: Describe any ways God has called you to "lay down your life" to serve others.

Q: How is God calling you personally to make sacrifices of your time, money and resources to serve others in need?

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Took

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In March of 2011, the world saw the worst nuclear plant disaster since Chernobyl in 1986, when an earthquake and tsunami hit the Fukushima Nuclear Plant in Japan. The effects of radioactivity are harmful and cancerous, and cleaning up a nuclear plant is notoriously high risk, health-wise.

After the disaster, however, a brave group of retired veterans, skilled engineers, and technicians – all over the age of 60 – volunteered to lead the way in terms of cleanup. Many of them understood the hazardous health conditions involved in the job, but it was because of their love for their country and their strong national identity that they saw an area to sacrifice for the common good.

In the same way, because of our love for Christ, and our identity in Him, we are called to live like He did, and sacrifice. All too often, we think so highly of our own routines and lifestyles that we are unwilling to let the Lord lead us toward actions of love that are inconvenient and designed to sanctify and teach us.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on how our actions speak louder than our words. What do your actions tell people about what is truly important to you? What you really believe? Whom you really follow? Whom you really value? What you really think is right and wrong? What do your actions tell people about your relationship with God? Are there any ways your actions show something different than what you say you believe? If you were to look in a spiritual mirror, what things in your life look like Jesus and what things don't?

PRAY for the Lord to give you His heart for others. Ask Him to give you the kind of self-sacrificial love that Jesus had for others, even those who are difficult to love. Ask Him to show you tangible ways you can love others in your circles of influence.

ACT: LOVE IN ACTION. Choose one way you can love someone by your actions this week. It could be providing for someone in physical need like in John's example, or it could be helping someone in emotional or spiritual need. Whatever you choose, it must be tangible, actively helping someone in a self-sacrificial way, not begrudgingly but with joy and love in your heart.

NEXT TIME in 1–3 John and Jude: Next week, John’s letter continues to talk about both loving others and the spirit of the antichrists, repeating the same themes to really drive his points home. He implores the believers not just to believe every spirit but to test the spirits to make sure they are really from God. This is what all his talk about light versus darkness and children of God versus children of the Devil has been pointing to – helping them to discern which of the teachers among them were really sent from God and which were false teachers trying to lead them astray.

¹ https://www.capitalchabad.com/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/424488/jewish/Two-Brothers.htm

² John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John* (IVP Academic, 1988).

³ D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (BJU Press, 1991).

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (F. H. Revell, 1971).

⁵ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John, The New American Commentary* (B & H Publishing, 2001).