

Righteousness and Love: Natural for a Believer

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E.V. Hill, Civil Rights advocate and faithful pastor of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, once hired a young African American girl as his secretary. He didn't know who she was other than her name and what she put on her application. A friend stopped by and asked, do you know who that is? He said, "Of course, that's Natalie Cole, she's new here. She works very well and I pay her a fair salary of \$2 an hour." The friend said, "That's Nat King Cole's daughter." Stunned, Hill asked Natalie to come into his office and asked why she didn't tell him who she was. She said, "I didn't know that it was required for the job. My daddy left me something, but I haven't come into it yet. It won't be mine until I am 21." At the time, she needed the job. Bills had to be paid and \$2/hour was keeping the lights on and food on the table. Yet, in just a few years she would inherit \$3.5 million dollars from her father's estate, which at 1965 dollars was a vast fortune.

Knowing who we are and understanding the time in which we live is critical to living life with perspective and purpose. In our text today, the apostle John is writing to a certain group of people, living in a certain time and culture. The early church thought that Christ's return was imminent, yet at the time of John's writing 50 years had passed since Christ's ascension. Besides having to wait, the early church was being plagued by false teachers and a culture that was hostile to the Gospel. John writes that they may know who they may understand how they have been changed by Christ and understand the time in which they live. Today believers must continue to wrestle with the pervasiveness of how much our nature has changed because of Christ and believe the Gospel when we doubt it.

John describes his listeners as little children earlier in chapter 2, but in verse 29 he makes a distinction about what kind of children they are. He says, "born of him". Not mentioned previously in the first two chapters, this phrase pops up 8 more times through the end of the letter. Born once to their biological parents, John is communicating the reality of who they now are as those born of God. They are new creations, not to be regarded as how they previously were regarded. Paul says in 2 Cor 5:16-17, "that we are not to regard one another according to our flesh. We are not to relate to what we see in the outward appearance, anymore. Paul says, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." A giraffe eats leaves and foliage. A Tiger eats meat. If you brought Mike the tiger a delicious spinach and quinoa salad, he would be uninterested at best. If you threw some bbq chicken into his cage, he would devour it. Tigers eat meat. **It is their nature. It's what they do.**

Fish live in water, take one out of the water and they don't do so well.

Breathing/swimming in water is what they do, it is their nature to do so.

Paul says that we are new creations. In I John 3, John says that we are God's children now. When you are a child of someone, your very DNA is wired such that you are like your parents. My best friend died 12 years ago this week at the age of 35. His two boys were both under 2 years of age. I vacationed with his boys last summer in Colorado. Though neither of them have personal memories of their father, from the way they smile, to the way they walk, they are clearly Erik's sons. When we grow up in a family, we share the DNA of our parents and we share characteristics, values, and actions.

I have five children, if you happened to swing by our house this week here are a few things you would see. There's a tent up on the back porch. When I was a boy my parents valued camping. I thus valued camping and now my kids after often asking when can we get out the pop up trailer or the tent and have another adventure outdoors. If you look inside our house by our dining room table you would see many things on the wall, including this poster. My wife grew up in a family that valued manners and valued education. Thus my wife is having my kids memorize this poster.

When we tell our kids to obey us, they know this is what that word means to us. When we make plans for vacation or family time, my kids naturally think of camping. They are Travis kids, it's who we are. If my kids don't obey that list, or choose not to go on a camping trip with us, it does not mean that they are no longer my children. It simply means that they are not choosing to live out at that moment the values that our family holds. John is setting the expectation of his listeners, you are children, born of God. Being God-like, and taking on His characteristics, is now the natural outflow of what it means to be His child. A branch in a grape vine doesn't surprisingly produce an orange or a cumquat one day, as a grape branch abides in a grape vine, it produces grapes.

I know what you're thinking. That seems so far from my reality. If this is true, why do I sin so much? The Bible has an incredibly realistic view of our lives. Paul in Romans 7 says, "For I do not understand my own actions, For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate." "I am of the flesh, sold under sin." Earlier in I John chapter 1, John said, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

We'll pick up the answers to this dilemma, but for now let the words of verse 2 soak into your hearts. "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him."

One day you will be fully free of sin, like God in His nature - perfectly loving, perfectly kind, wonderfully patient, without any hint of worry and anxiety. The degree to which the characteristics of God are demonstrated now in your life, does not diminish or negate any way the reality that for all of those who have been born of God, who have become His children, **your new nature in Christ is one that is absolutely/profoundly changed from your old.**

The application from this point is spelled out for us in the beginning of the first verse. The ESV says to “See what kind of love the Father has given to us.....that we are these new children of God”. The word see has the fuller nuance of meaning “BEHOLD”. When see something of great wealth or majestic beauty, we behold it. When I saw the Grand Canyon for the first time, when I watched my bride come down the aisle, watching my child be born, these are times that the word “behold” best describes the proper grander and weightiness of the moment and my proper response.

Transition:

Our understanding of the pervasiveness of our new nature in Christ totally impacts how we read the rest of the chapter. [Hold up 2x4 and hold up the couch pillow] What we are going to discuss in our next point, is going to feel like one of these. When my wife wants to have a serious discussion that I need to hear, because she loves, she asks can we sit down on the couch. Her words are truthful and are given in love, they come soft like a pillow. Sometimes if my heart isn't right, what she is trying to communicate and what I need to hear can feel like a swat across the forehead with this. Whether we read the following verses as a barrage of deafening chastisements or a gentle whisper of love, totally depends upon the significance of much we grasp what John has communicated in the opening two verses.

Because of our new nature in Christ and becoming a new creation, righteousness and love are what will naturally flow. Sin and hate are not what is characteristic of a child of God. “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness.” “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil.” “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning.” Do you hear those words as a pillow or a 2x4? In a crowd this size there is no way to address the myriad of ways those sentences play out, but I'll try.

A practice of sinning: when I've discussed this phrase in Bible studies this week, each group quickly said that they are so aware that they sin - regularly. Is John saying that all of my FPC friends are children of the devil? They admitted to exemplifying his characteristics at times. The heart of this passage is not to have us

stewing in the audience today over who is a child of devil and who is a child of God. John's point is that those who are born of God will not have a practice of sinning. Their new nature is one of righteousness and love.

My oldest child was born into my family 14 years ago. What I expected of her when she was a baby is very different than what I expect to see coming from her life now. When she was a baby she wailed and cried when she was hungry. Now when she's hungry, she goes into the kitchen and makes herself a sandwich. If there wasn't growth and she continued to throw a tantrum because she wanted someone to spoon feed her, it would be unnatural. Thankfully, as expected, she happily makes her own food.

In verse 7 John exhorts his readers to not let anyone deceive them. In Chapter 2 he said that there were anti-Christ's among them. We'll talk about who they are next week in I John 4, but for now note that John is having to exhort his listeners to not be deceived. We can be deceived into thinking our present lives of tolerating sin is what is to be expected. John says it is not. The new nature of one born into God's family is one of righteousness and love.

Many of you are asking, in fact the secular world looks at the church declaring it a bunch of hypocrites and is asking, why isn't there more of a difference in our lives than those who don't claim to know God. Let me first address the skeptics in the room who say that Christians are hypocritical and profess to be godly, yet they appear to only hurl judgment on others and come across as intolerant and unloving. The message of the cross is not that Christ died to make us a little bit better version of ourselves and to give us a compass or blueprint that we might be a bit more moralistic. The message of the cross is that all mankind in their natural state is in rebellion to God. In God's mercy and grace, He sent us a Savior that we desperately needed that we might have a new nature. Like a crying infant, a toddling toddler, or a rebellious teenager, the scripture is clear that our new nature needs time to grow to maturity.

The other challenge in judging the church is that not all of those who call themselves Christians are truly born of God. In the book of Romans the apostle Paul says that all men are born dead to God because of our sins. In contrast, John says in his gospel that it is to all 'those' who receive Christ that have become, have been born, children of God. Created in His image, and given general revelation we can know some things about God. However, knowledge of God and being born of God are different. Like one who might know about George Bush, Barak Obama, or Donald Trump, reading news about a president is undeniably different than knowing one personally. After the 2016 Flood when Obama came to town, he

never gave me a call to see if I could join him for a game of basketball so that he could unwind after touring a flood ravaged neighborhood.

Now let me address those who do know the Lord and are asking why they don't see more change in their life and the fruit of being a child of God. Just you received the good news of Jesus to first become born of God by faith, we must continue to grow in the gospel by faith. John's opening words in chapter three are, "Behold what kind of love the father has given to us, that we should be called children of God." Beholding takes a focused effort to slow down. It involves choosing to ponder what is true. How often do you personally read your Bible to remind yourself of what is true?

There was once a pirate ship with an evil captain. Every day the evil captain would walk by his crew berating them and tell them, "swab the deck!". Day after day, year after year, the crew had to obey; the evil captain was in charge. Finally one day there was mutiny on the ship. The evil captain was overthrown, banished to the brig, and a new benevolent captain took over leadership of the vessel. The new captain was in charge, but the brig where the old captain was locked up was on the top deck. One day a member of the crew came walking by the brig and the old captain bellowed out, "Darin, you good for nothing, you total mess, drop down and start swabbing the deck!" After years of being conditioned by the evil captain's voice, you drop down and start scrubbing. But then the new captain walks by and says, "Darin, why are you scrubbing the deck?" I say, "because the captain told me to." The benevolent captain says, "that evil captain is no longer in charge - get up!" **The new nature of those born of God is one of righteousness and love.**

The last point that I want to convey is that if your heart is uneasy today reading this text, take that as great encouragement from the Lord.

When my wife sits me down on the couch to talk, it's because she loves me and wants me to live as the good husband/father that she knows I can be. If you are still feeling low, in John's last paragraph he writes that these truths are to reassure our hearts. He says that if our heart condemns us, "God is even greater than our heart, and He knows everything." Understand that a young child's heart, and even grown adult hearts, can be deceived. Trust that God, who knows everything is sovereignly drawing His children to Him. Whether you are a skeptic non-believer, or a flailing adolescent truly in the faith, John's closing commandment in verse 23 is to believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ. To believe is to repent of our own self-sufficiency, to choose to believe what God says is true, and commit our actions and heart to the Lord. This will allow us to love one another and live righteous lives.

When E.V. Hill hired a young Natalie Cole, he had no idea the significance of the royalty who was working for him. For those who are in Christ and are born of God, the reality of who we truly are because of Christ is glorious and will be fully revealed at Christ's second coming.

THE ORPHAN

Lacks a vital daily intimacy with God
Anxious about friends, money, school, grades, etc.
Feels as if no one cares about you
Lives on a success/fail basis
Needs to look good
Feels guilty and condemned
Struggles to trust things to God
Has to fix your problems
Not very teachable
Is defensive when accused of error or weakness
Needs to be right
Lacks confidence
Feels discouraged and defeated
Strong-willed with ideas, agendas, and opinions
Solution to failure: "Try harder"
Has a critical spirit (complaining and bitterness)
Tears others down
A "competent analyst" of others' weaknesses
Tends to compare yourself with others
Feels powerless to defeat the flesh
Needs to be in control of situations and others
Looks for satisfaction in "positions"
Looks for satisfaction in "possessions"
Motivated by obligation and duty, not love

THE SON/DAUGHTER

Feels freed from worry because of God's love for you
Learning to live in a daily partnership with God
Not fearful of God
Feels forgiven and totally accepted
A daily trust in God's sovereign plan for your life
Prayer is a first resort
Content in relationships b/c you are accepted by God
Freedom from making a name for yourself
Is teachable by others
Open to criticism b/c you rest on Christ's perfection
Able to examine your deeper motives
Able to take risks—even to fail
Encouraged by the Spirit working in you
Able to see God's goodness in dark times
Content with what Christ has provided
Trusting less in self and more in the Holy Spirit
Aware of inability to fix life, people, and problems
Is able to freely confess your faults to others
Doesn't always have to be right
Does not gain value from man-made "props"
Experiences more and more victory over the flesh
Prayer is a vital, ongoing part of the day
Jesus is more and more the subject of conversation
God truly satisfies your soul

Taken from "The Gospel-Centered Life" by Robert Thune and Will Walker