

1 John 3:1-18 Revisited

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Preacher: Chris Oswald

[0:00] We're in 1 John chapter 3 this morning. We had a glorious Sunday last week! I got to do the ministerial trifecta.

We had preaching, Lord's table, baptisms, a wedding. It was a beautiful day. Last week we took a short time because of all the baptismal testimonies to examine the first couple verses of John chapter 3 where John talks about a great love, a particular kind of love that the Father has given to us.

And today we are going to continue through almost the rest of the chapter. Whenever I have the opportunity to present or to show you some pattern that exists throughout Scripture, I always want to seize that because I want you, as a result of listening to these sermons, to feel more empowered to read the Bible on your own.

And sometimes just particular patterns are helpful. When you begin to read through the Gospels or read through the Epistles, here's one particular pattern I point you to. You will see something like this in most of the Epistles anyway.

After presenting the pure Gospel, the Apostle will make an appeal to personal holiness, and he will then make a particular target, like just general personal holiness, but personal holiness particularly applied to personal relationships.

[1:35] This is a pattern you'll see in most of the Epistles. Presentation of the pure Gospel, a call to practical holiness, and then a targeting in on one particular area of holiness, and that is holiness in your personal relationships.

And we see that in this particular passage. In verses 1 and 2, we have the pure Gospel, the beautiful Gospel presented in 1 John 3. See what kind of love the Father has given to us.

The Greek there is, from what country has this love come, that we should be called children of God. And so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know Him.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is.

And from this examination of the pure Gospel, there is a shift to a focus on practical holiness. In verses 3 through 9, And everyone thus hopes in Him, purifies himself as He is pure.

[2:42] 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 keeps on sinning. No one who keeps on sinning has either seen Him or known Him. No one who makes a practice of sinning.

No one who 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. So, pure Gospel, first two verses, next section of verses, an emphasis on practical holiness, and then a zeroing in on one particular necessary area of godliness, namely practical holiness in your personal relationships.

And that's what is included in verses 10 through 18. Read verse 10 with me. By this it is evident who are the children of God. Who are the children of the devil?

[4:04] 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. We're talking about generally practical holiness, and then getting more specific about one essential expression of holiness, namely loving your brother or your sister.

Verse 11, For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning. Call back to Jesus. Farewell discourse, John 13, that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother.

And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. See, we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and truth.

[5:29] So there's the pattern, and you're going to see this. I just want to show you this in a number of epistles real quickly. I believe we've got a slide for that. You will see the presentation of the gospel, for instance, in the book of Galatians, all the way through to chapter 5 or so.

And then in pivoting in chapter 5, say around verse 13, Paul says something like, you've been called to freedom, which is kind of the key message of the gospel proclamation in Galatia.

You've been called to freedom, but don't use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. Now he's shifting into a discussion of practical holiness. And in that discussion of practical holiness, he double clicks and gets to one particular area, and that is the issue of personal relationships.

And you can see this in Ephesians, in Colossians, 1 Peter, and James. I think you can see this in all the epistles. These are the most evident, I think. So when you're reading the New Testament, especially when you're reading any of the epistles, you might ask yourself, which section of the argument am I in?

Am I in the section that is presenting the pure, glorious gospel? Am I in the section that is presenting a call to practical holiness? Or am I in the section that is beneath that call, and that is practical holiness as it relates to our personal relationships?

[6:48] Now, there's a reason why this pattern exists. And it's summed up in the theological term antinomianism, which simply means against the law.

Antinomianism is the reason this pattern exists. Human beings have a natural tendency toward antinomianism, amongst other things, when they encounter the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Tozer, who I do not recommend just wholeheartedly, sometimes I'll quote people I don't recommend wholeheartedly, but I think he has good things to say about antinomianism in particular. And he writes this, Christianity in our times is deeply influenced by that ancient enemy of righteousness, antinomianism.

The creed of the antinomian is easily stated. We are saved by faith alone. Works have no place in salvation. So far, so good. Conduct is works and is therefore of no importance.

We cannot do, what we do cannot matter as long as we believe rightly. The divorce between creed and conduct is absolute and final.

[7 : 56] The question of sin is settled by the cross. Conduct is outside the circle of faith and cannot come between the believer and God. Such, in brief, is the teaching of the antinomian.

And so fully has it permeated modern Christianity that is accepted by the religious masses as the very truth of God. But antinomianism is the doctrine of grace carried by uncorrected logic to the point of absurdity.

It takes the teaching of justification by faith and twists it into deformity. So the reason that this pattern exists is because there's a particular response that the flesh has to the good news of the gospel.

And it is something like, great, now I can do what I want. It's not the only possible response the flesh has to the gospel. But it's one of such prominence and predictability that you can find almost every apostle in almost every epistle, after declaring the pure gospel, emphasize the importance of practical holiness.

And that is because the person who hears the gospel in their flesh will very often think, oh, well, this is great news. I now get to do what I want.

[9 : 14] Now, here's somebody I can recommend just universally, just about anyway. And that's Martin Lloyd-Jones. And yes, this week, I'm sure this is him and not me. If you were here last week, you would know what I'm talking about.

But listen to what he says. And this just underlines the point I'm making about the connection between the gospel and the way that it potentially provokes the flesh to discount the importance of holiness.

You've got a very good test whether you are preaching the gospel in the right way. What's that? Well, let me put it to you like this. Let me put it like this to you. If your presentation of the gospel does not expose it to the charge of antinomianism, you are probably not putting it correctly.

The gospel, you see, comes as this free gift of God, irrespective of what man does. Now, the moment you say a thing like that, you are liable to provoke somebody to say, well, if that is so, it doesn't matter what I do.

And so Jones takes this pretty far. He says, if you want to know whether you're presenting the pure gospel in the way that the apostles would present the pure gospel, look and see if people hear what you're saying and reflexively think, oh, well, then I can just do what I want.

[10 : 33] He says, that's a sign that you're actually presenting it rightly. And I think that's true. And I think that the reason that the pattern exists that I just showed you is because this is such a predictable phenomenon that wise, careful pastors understand that when I present the gospel rightly, some will take it wrongly.

And it will be taken wrongly in a very particular way. Now, for a practical kind of outline of the way that antinomianism reveals itself, I want to bring one more quote from one more solid guy.

Augustus' top lady has a really good thing to say about antinomianism. Let me just read this to you and then we'll get back to the text. Practical antinomianism is the habitual, allowed, and persevering violation of those precepts which God hath prescribed for the adjustment of our outward conduct, whether those rules regard our demeanor toward him, toward our neighbor, or toward ourselves.

Let a person's ideas be ever so orthodox, yet if his life be immoral, he is, to all intents and purposes, a practical antinomian.

Unless the effectual grace of the Holy Spirit intervenes to retrieve him from the dominion of his sins, he must, after death, be among those to whom Christ will say, Depart from me, I never knew you, ye workers of my conduct.

[12:00] Antinomianism says, essentially, there is a complete disconnect between my salvation and my conduct, and how dare you suggest otherwise. Top lady says, that's practical antinomianism.

I want to add two more categories before we return to the text, and one would be particular antinomianism. How many believers in this room have a special carve-out for the special sin?

They're not generally antinomian. They simply have a few exceptions to God's righteous law that they tolerate in their own life.

So there's a particular antinomianism. Generally, you would agree that your conduct must be holy as God is holy, but in particular areas, you've created a little antinomian carve-out.

The third thing I want to sensitize you to is just this idea of passive antinomianism. Many people think of the God's law as simply telling you what not to do, but God's law is full of prescriptions to love well, love sacrificially, work hard, pray without ceasing, give generously.

[13:08] And so there's a kind of antinomian who is focused on all the things he must not do, and think that that is the end of God's righteous requirements under the law? No. God wants you to do more than simply abstain from a few bad behaviors.

He wants you to live a life zealous for good works that he has prepared in advance for you to walk in. And so one form of antinomianism is, it's like, yeah, you're pretty good at abstaining from the things you should abstain from, but you're not using God's law, God's word, as a way of highlighting what you should be about actively.

Now, this is antinomianism. Obviously, I'm sure if you have the Lord, like, you recognize some of this in yourself. I saw some wincing as I was discussing this.

The reason that this is a problem, and we're getting to why does John talk about this stuff the way he does, is that man's basic nature has a tendency to take God's gifts and pervert them toward the flesh's preferred sort of behaviors and way of approaching life.

And one of the things that we need to understand as Christians is that the gospel does not, while it gives us a new nature, it does not entirely remove the old nature.

[14:34] It certainly diminishes it. It gives us a new option. We now not only have the flesh, but also the spirit. We not only have the old man, but we have the new man. But we still live in the context where even the pure gospel presented to us speaks to two parts of us.

And one part of us would respond with holy gratitude and zeal to obey the Lord. But another part of us, that old man, the flesh, still hears the gospel the way that an antinomian hears the gospel.

And so John is trying to help. Of course, we've discussed a lot of this. He's trying to help people discern between true and false Christianity. And this is the essential way to do so.

How do you respond to the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ? That question reveals what's really going on inside of you.

You will find that the apostles rarely stop as they minister to these congregations. They rarely stop with a declaration of grace. They almost always circle back and say, I write these things so that you will not sin.

[15:47] There's almost always a circling back to the issue of practical holiness after sharing the pure gospel. And that's because the new birth produces a new capacity.

The flesh tempts us to complacency toward righteousness. But the spirit receives the gospel and moves us into practical holiness, into good works, and so forth.

I think it's crazy to think about how the gospel awakens both the best and the worst within us. To the spiritual ear, to the new man that God has given you as you've been born again in Christ, Lord willing, the gospel provokes immense gratitude, hope, and a new standard for how you should treat others.

But there's another part of you, hopefully not a very dominant part of you, hopefully a part that you have put to death over and over again, as Paul calls us to.

But there's another part of you that hears the glorious gospel as one big fat permission slip. It's kind of crazy, but it fits the general pattern we see in Scripture, and that is that all of God's blessings are amplifiers of our fundamental nature.

[17:09] All of God's blessings are amplifiers of our fundamental nature. Money? Well, the flesh is going to receive the abundance of money in one way. The flesh is going to receive the abundance, or the spirit is going to receive the abundance of money in a different way.

Health? Free time? This is just the way that human beings respond to God's lavish blessings. If we only have the flesh, we will only respond by perverting and using God's gifts toward our own ends.

But through the glory of salvation, if we've received a new nature, we can now respond to God's great gifts in the way that he intended. The idea is that the same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay, and the same message that awakens the spirit provokes license to the flesh.

Now, that's all a setup to understand what John is doing in verses, say, 3 through 18 or so. What he is attempting to do is not call you to perfection.

He's already said in 1 John 1 that if you say you have no sin, you're lying. The call in this section is not to just say that you have no sin.

[18:24] He's not expecting perfection out of his people. What he is doing is he's asking, what is your relationship to sin? Not whether or not you have it, but what is your relationship to sin?

Is it something you are glad to do? Is it something you practice? Is it something you pursue? Or is it something you hate? And your relationship with the gospel is going to protect a lot, or not protect, but predict kind of how you respond.

His concern is not perfection. It's spiritual authenticity. Are you really a Christian is the basic question. How would we know if you are really a Christian? How do you respond to the gospel?

Does the gospel wind up giving you permission to do what you want, or does the gospel call you to righteousness?

Look at verse 9 of 1 John 3. 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.

[19:42] We've talked for weeks about John's use of, there's different ways of talking about this, but ontological ethics, that your basic being, your essence, predicts your actions.

And the big question of not only 1 John, but 2 and 3 John, is the test of authentic faith, and whether you're really in or whether you're really out, and it fundamentally comes down to, have you been born of God?

Because if you've been born of God, your response to the gospel, while wavering occasionally because you are still a sinner, and you still have the old man, and you still deal with the flesh, your response to the gospel will be zeal for good works.

Your response to the gospel will be practical holiness. Now, not only does he call you, in response to this pure gospel, to practical holiness, but every, just about every place that this pattern emerges, you'll see a real quick pivot into one particular area of personal holiness, practical holiness, and that is, do you love the people that God's given you to love?

Love is almost always used as the fundamental litmus test for whether or not you are indeed a real Christian or not. And you can see why that is. Just to state the obvious, good theology is not the litmus test of a viable Christian.

[21 : 09] I don't know how you will eventually get to a good life full of good works without good theology, but you cannot stop with good theology and call that maturity.

The fundamental test of maturity is, are you more loving? And loving specifically in the way that God is loving. That's the real test of maturity.

And so he pivots from a call to generally practical holiness all the way into verse 10, a call to a very specific expression of holiness, and that is to love your brothers and your sisters.

Friends, I get frustrated with how many false dichotomies have been introduced into the Christian faith, and one of them would be that somehow holiness and love are disconnected or different in any respect.

But I will just tell you that if you would like to become a holy person, in God's eyes, you must be a loving person. That's the fundamental expression of holiness that God constantly leads us to in his word, is to be a loving person.

[22 : 17] Look at verse 10 of chapter 3. By this it is evident who are the children of God, 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.

That's when he's going into this particular area. For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother.

Why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know, we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

I can't imagine, if you're just thinking rightly, of course, that's a big ask. Like, we struggle to think rightly. I cannot imagine anyone having assurance that they are saved if they are not self-evidently selfless, loyal, long-suffering, and kind.

I can't imagine where your assurance would come from. Jesus gives us the litmus test in John 3. He says, a new commandment I give to you, love one another as I have loved you, and by this the world will know.

[23 : 39] The fundamental measuring stick of whether or not you are born again, whether or not you are maturing, is your ability to love as Christ loves.

That's what John's telling us. Don't be deceived into thinking it's simply because you believe the gospel message you have been born again. Many believe the gospel message and retreat into a hateful individualism where it's all about them and their little group of people.

John and Paul and Peter and James are all saying, no, no. Those who have been born again will be kind.

Those who have been born again will be patient. What is the fruit of the Spirit after all but sort of relational harmonizers? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness.

The pivot that you see throughout all of the epistles, including this one, is that they call you to a practical, general godliness, and then he always gets to talking about and be nice to your wife and work hard for your boss and kids submit to your parents.

[24:53] And it's always a horizontal test of whether or not the gospel has actually taken root in you. That's why if you're ever attempting to overcome a particular sin, and God knows we walk together in these things, and so many of us have had conversations, one-on-one conversations, about this or that sin that you're attempting to overcome, that you're frustrated with, that you're trying to get past.

The thing that I would always tell people, no matter what that sin is, whatever you came into my house to talk to me about, whatever the sin is, I will always try to help you to see how the sin you're committing is unloving.

Why? Because the basic impulse of the born-again heart is to love. And if I can show you that pornography is unloving, if I can show you that anger is unloving, if I can show you that low self-control is unloving, and that laziness is unloving, then if you are His, you will know this is unacceptable in a particular way, a way that the born-again heart finds utterly disgusting, and that is, I am not being a loving person.

It's the most antithetical to the nature of Jesus. It's the most antithetical to the fundamental thing the Holy Spirit's doing in you. Look at the fruit of the Spirit.

And so if you're trying to overcome something, even if it's like, you just want to wake up on time, friends, recast every struggle, every improvement into this fundamental question. Will this change for the better help me to love the people God has called me to love in a better way?

[26:43] And what you'll find is that there is a whole lot of fuel in your heart through the Holy Spirit to make many changes, not for your own sake, not so that you stop thinking terribly about yourself, but for the sake of others.

frame all of your pursuits of sanctification into expressions of love and see what happens. You will see tremendous progress.

Now, as we circle down into this concept that John's drilling us into of not only be practically holy, but be holy in this particular way, be loving, let's think about the antinomian kind of ways that this manifests itself.

We listed three different forms of antinomianism previously, the practical antinomianism. And I think here, this would just be someone thinking that you can just be a good theologian or you could just know the gospel and that how you love people has no relevance on the reality of your salvation.

Well, that would just be antinomianism. Then there's a kind of particular or partial antinomianism where you'd be like, I will love everybody but this person. Or I will love in these ways but not this way.

[27:58] And again, if you're first time here, this may sound like, you know, no one who knows me would confuse me as a hippy-dippy guy who, like, there's tons of fences around what love is and isn't and it's certainly not to the individual who's being loved to dictate what love looks like and so forth.

I try to draw these fences regularly but probably not much today. But a particular antinomianist would say something like, well, I love most people but just this one or I love in most ways but not in this way and so forth.

And then a passive antinomian and men, man, our world would be different if we all understood that very often we are passive antinomian in this sense.

We don't pursue people. We react to requests we respond to needs that are communicated to us that we do not obey what the scriptures tell us to consider and think and spend our intellectual and emotional energy thinking about others and how we can love them.

The marriages, the homes, the cities that would be transformed if men stopped being passive antinomian and started saying, no, God has called me to get out there and hustle and love and pursue and that's what I'm going to do.

[29 : 28] I'm not simply going to respond. I'm going to pursue. That's the sensible message that John's presenting to us today. Here is the glorious gospel.

What kind of love the Father has given us. John 17, 23, the particular love he's given us is the love that he had for the Son. From what country does this love come from, John says in the Greek?

It comes from the triune relationship. It comes from triune love. That's the glorious gospel you have received completely without warrant, without merit, without deserving it at all.

You have received just this devastatingly pure affection from the Father that is rooted in his esteem for the Son. This is all in fulfillment of what Jesus prayed in John 17, 23, and 24.

Now, because these men were pastors, because they knew the human heart, they knew that whenever this declaration of the pure gospel would come, even the best of Christians would be tempted, at least in their flesh, to think, well, this just means that I'm set.

[30 : 40] If I've been put under the warm blanket of the Father's love for the Son, then I'm good. It doesn't matter what I do, and that's why you'll see over and over again as the pure gospel is presented, some pivot to practical holiness.

John does that beginning in verse 3 all the way to verse 9, and he just says, hey guys, anyone who keeps on sinning has not been born of God. And then he drills it a little bit further because I think the hardest thing to do is to love people.

The hardest thing to do, I think, is to love people well. And it's the most important thing to do in terms of what Jesus gives us as a diagnostic of whether or not you're saved.

And so he moves just from a simple call to practical holiness to a very particular area of practical holiness, and that is to love one another well. So now we can move into verse 16.

And by moving here, also introduce communion. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

[31 : 52] I am so grateful that God in his perfect foresight did not fill his holy book with calls to love and fail to define what that love was.

Because then we would be in a situation, wait, wait a minute, we're in this situation. We'd be even worse, where the culture would simply give us their preferred definition this week for love, and we wouldn't know what we were supposed to do.

We're not only called to love in God's Word, we're told exactly what love looks like. It looks like Christ offering himself for those he came to save.

It looks like the Father not simply reacting to the events on earth, but intervening and pursuing sinners. It looks like the Father loving so much and so well that he extends the most precious thing for our salvation.

John says in 1 John 3, 16, By this we know love that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

[33 : 09] That'd be an antinomian kind of love. How does God's love abide in him? Doesn't. Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth.

So if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, whether you're a member of Providence or not, we would invite you to share in this Lord's Table observance, and we would invite you to share with this particular thought in your head.

We know what love looks like. In a moment, we're going to taste and see that the Lord is good, and that he loved us so well he did not withhold even his own son for the securing of our great salvation.

So when we come together and we take these elements and return to our seat, what we ought to be thinking about is this great love that Jesus has given me ought to start working its way out into my life in some particular ways.

We don't often take enough time probably to fence the table, but I would just encourage you to understand this is the moment where you would need to surrender your bitterness forgiveness, and your refusal to reconcile, and your moral high ground, and all of it.

[34 : 22] This would be the moment where you say, Lord, I don't know what it looks like, but let me be a loving man. Let me be a loving woman. If the Holy Spirit puts anything in particular on your heart as you participate today, please yield to the Lord.

Yield to the Lord. He knows best. He's going to lead you into green pastures and besides the waters if you'll simply follow the shepherd of your souls. So let me pray for us and then you come.

Lord God, we praise your holy name for your faithfulness and care for us. We love you, Lord, but only because you first loved us. We pray, God, that you would sensitize our hearts to the reality, our hearts and minds to the reality that even the gospel, which is the best gift, can be twisted by the flesh into something it was never meant to be.

So Lord, we pray that even as we receive the gospel week after week, we would receive it through your Holy Spirit, that it would have its intended effect on us, that you would protect us from all the potential errors downstream when we walk in the flesh.

And Lord, most of all, would you let each and every person in this room, Lord, every person in this room know the love of Christ and then live out that love in their personal relationships.

[35 : 39] We pray all these things in the name of our mighty Savior Jesus. Amen. Come. Amen.