

1 John 3

by Daniel Steele

In this sermon, Daniel Steele explores the profound implications of being a child of God, emphasizing love, holiness, and the believer's struggle against sin.

Scripture: John 1:12

Topics: "Christian Love", "Divine Adoption"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the importance of love as the essence of Christianity, emphasizing that true believers are inspired by God's love to become like Him in moral character. He delves into the significance of being children of God through adoption, highlighting the distinction between the world's values and those of believers. Steele discusses the transformative power of faith, the assurance of being like Christ when He appears, and the necessity of abiding in God through obedience and love for one another. He addresses the practical implications of brotherly love, self-sacrifice, and the continuous efficacy of the divine birth in believers' lives.

Transcript

HALF-HOURS WITH JOHN'S EPISTLES

FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

CHAPTER III.

THE third chapter should begin with the last verse of the second, which speaks of being begotten of God. Then naturally the author describes the present character and future position of the children of God when their real glory, now unappreciated by the world, shall be outwardly manifested.

1. "Behold." This is not a mere interjection of surprise, but a verb in the plural number calling on all to gaze upon something actually visible now to eyes anointed by the Holy Spirit, and destined to be transcendently glorious hereafter.

"What manner of love." Love is the very essence of Christianity distinguishing it from all false religions. Its origin is not earthly, but heavenly. It is a spark dropped from the skies, not to consume sinners, but to illumine and purify believers.

"The Father." This title and its correlative, child or son, always in the New Testament denotes a spiritual relation. To treat the Fatherhood of God as natural, including all men, irrespective of character, is the fundamental error of the so-called liberalism which in modern times wears the mark of Christianity. See John i. 12, 13.

"Hath given to us." Subjective love cannot be given, but it bestows such gifts as shall awaken responsive love in the heart of its object. The gift of God's only begotten Son is designed to produce this effect in every sinner who hears and believes the gospel. True believers are thus inspired with a love which is like the love of God, and by its transforming power they are enabled to claim the title of children of God, because they have become like Him in moral character. In Hebrew phrase a wise man is a son of wisdom and a godlike man is a son of God.

The pronouns "we" and "us" throughout this Epistle refer to believers. "That we (literally, in order that we) should be called." Adoption into the family of God, not only nominal, but real, is the purpose of that love which manifests itself in the unspeakable gift of His Son.

"Called." Divinely acknowledged.

"The children of God." The A. V. erroneously has "sons." Community of nature is denoted by "children," and privilege and maturity are implied in "sons" The only place in John's writings where "son" is used of man's relation to God is Rev. xxi. 7. "Son" is a favorite word with Paul.

"And such we are." Two precious Greek words, "kai esmen," have been recovered by sacred scholarship since the A. V. was made in 1611 A. D. The author seems to have inserted these words parenthetically as his own personal testimony to a realized fact corresponding to the reputed historic position of members of Christ's church.

"Therefore the world knoweth us not." For the good reason that it was so spiritually blind as totally to fail to recognize God revealed in Jesus Christ, and to crucify Him between two thieves.

"The world" is recognized as the power hostile to God and to all who bear His image. The believer in Christ is the object of two opposite forces, the one drawing toward sin and perdition and the other toward holiness and heaven. The result is determined by his persistent choice.

His preference of things not seen to things seen, of grace over gold, of self-denial instead of self-indulgence, is to the world an insoluble mystery, because the spring of action cannot be understood.

"Him." God in Christ is the person totally unknown to the world. Says Augustine, "By loving the pleasures of sin men ignore God; by loving what the fever craves men damage the reputation of the physician." Unbelief counteracts the remedies of the Great Physician.

2. "It is not yet made manifest" . . . "if he shall be manifested." The chief difficulty is in the last clause. It may be rendered "if it shall be manifested," having for its subject the impersonal "it," as in the first clause. But this interpretation, though it seems to be natural, obscures the meaning by making the certainty that we shall be like Him dependent on its manifestation to our minds. But this certainty is absolute, and conditioned upon no such future contingency; we know that we who perseveringly believe shall be like Him when He appears. This knowledge that we shall be like Christ cannot be said to depend upon the manifestation of what we shall be. Our exegesis is confirmed by the rendering of the same phrase in ii. 28, "if he shall be manifested;" a personal subject is also used in iii. 8.

"Because we shall see." Here "because" is ambiguous. "The likeness to God may be either (1) the necessary condition, or (2) the actual consequence of the Divine Vision. The argument may be: We shall see God, and, therefore, since this is possible, we must be like Him; or, We shall see God, and in that presence we shall reflect His glory, and be transformed into His likeness." (Bishop Westcott.)

If in the light of the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," we accept the first exegesis, the likeness is the condition of the vision. If the second exegesis had been the idea in the mind of John, the expression would have been "we shall become like Him" instead of "shall be like Him." "We see that which we have the sympathetic power of seeing." Says Augustine, "The entire life of a good Christian is holy desire. But what you desire you do not yet see; but by desiring you will be rendered capacious, so that when He comes you will be filled with what you see. . . . God by deferring enlarges desire, by desiring He extends the mind, by extending He makes its receptivity larger. This is our whole life that we may be educated by desiring." Hence John in this verse appears to mark a state which co-exists with the Divine manifestation at the first, and does not follow from it. There are texts (2 Cor. iii. 18, v. 4) which teach the transfiguring virtue of the inner revelation of God in Christ by the Holy Ghost. The chief element of the vision of God is knowledge, real, intuitive and continuous, a preparation and incentive to joyful service. "His servants render religious service to Him and they shall see His face and His name shall be in their foreheads." (Rev. xxii. 4.)

Beware of the doctrine of the possibility of acquiring moral purity after the second coming of Christ. Holiness is never in the Holy Scriptures an object of hope, for the good reason that its present possession by the believer is always assumed.

The schoolmen discussed the question whether the human intellect will ever become able to see God in essence. We believe that we will always see Him only in His glorified Son. Augustine thus portrays this Divine vision: "Therefore we are about to gaze upon a certain vision . . . transcending all terrestrial beauties of gold, of silver, of groves and plains, of the sea and of the air, the beauty of the sun and moon and stars, the beauty of the angels, surpassing all things, because all things are beautiful on account of this vision itself. What therefore shall we be when we see this? What has been promised to us? Like Him shall we be, because we shall see Him as He is. The tongue has spoken in what manner it could; let the rest be pondered in the heart."

3. "Every one that hath this hope on Him." The practical lesson of the Divine vision and its antecedent condition of likeness to Him is the motive to perseverance in holy living. Sin weaves a film over the spiritual eye. Sanctification removes that film, and persistence in that faith which retains the indwelling Sanctifier keeps it from returning to darken the soul. Thus faith requires constant personal effort directed to this definite point, "purifieth himself." This can be done by the believer only indirectly, since purification is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is ours constantly to fulfil the conditions on which He sanctifies entirely and abides permanently. Says Augustine, "Who but God purifies us? But God does not purify thee against thy will. Therefore, so far as you adjust your will to God you purify yourself. . . . Because in that matter you do something by your own voluntary act, on this account this something is ascribed to yourself." The practice of ceremonial purification which was required before appearing in God's presence in the temple (John xi. 55) explains this form of expression. See Heb. x. 19-22. 'Me of whom it is said that he purifies himself not only keeps himself actually 'pure,' but disciplines and trains himself that he may move more surely among the defilements of the world." (1 Tim. v. 22; 1 Pet. iii. 2.) (Bishop Westcott.)

"Even as that one (Christ) is pure." The pronoun "that one" in this Epistle refers to Jesus as a man, and the Greek word for "pure" applies only to a virtue attained by human discipline. It is chosen here to emphasize the reference to the Lord's life on the earth. In iv. 17, "as he is so are we in this world," the likeness of Christians to Christ is to His character as it is at present and eternally, and not only to its historical manifestation.

John now comes to a description of Gnostic teachers suggested by the idea of purification. The basal thought of these false teachers, who called themselves "the gnostic or knowing ones," is salvation in knowledge. This idea is everywhere present.

Sin is now considered in its manifestation, and defined in its essence.

4. "Every one that doeth sin," despite his philosophic theories and the intensity of his fancied illumination and superior knowledge, "doeth also lawlessness." Sin cannot be concealed by fine sounding phrases, such as an innocent misstep, a pardonable error. Every voluntary violation of the known law of God is a realization of sin in its completeness (Greek -- "the" sin).

"Sin is lawlessness." These are convertible terms, and with equal truth the sentence may be read backwards. Sin is a wilful collision of a finite will with the highest authority in the universe. A failure to fulfil the law which man was created to keep, on which his happiness is suspended, is more than a disaster, it is a sin. Duty is threefold, to God, to men and to self. Hence there are three forms of sin. In each form there may be the doing of what is forbidden, which is a sin of commission, and the failure to do what is required, which is the sin of omission. In the last analysis sin may be traced to selfishness. See James i. 14, 15, for the first form of sin as selfishness, and James iv. 17 for the second form, a selfish failure in duty to others, which is emphasized by Christ in His description of the final judgment. (Matt. xxv. 31-46.) Sin reaches its climax when, having heard of the mission of Christ, the sinner sets Him at naught in His purpose "to take away sins." This He does, says Bede, "by forgiving sins, by helping us to keep from committing sins, and by reason of our moral inability to sin wilfully (Gen. xxix. 9) against one whom we love with the whole heart. Deliverance from punishment is the least part of Christ's work of taking away sins. He takes away the disposition to sin from every one who by faith claims His full heritage of divine grace. "He came to remove all sins, even as He was Himself sinless." (Bishop Westcott.) This explains how sin is utterly incompatible with fellowship with Him. It implies a rebuke of the Gnostic teachers, for the practice of sin, and it proved their professed knowledge of Christ to be unreal and hypocritical.

6. "Abiding in Him." This is more than simply "being" in Christ, because it expresses effort, and the present tense denotes that it is continuous.

"Sinneth not," literally "is not sinning." Character and fixed habit are here predicated, and not an isolated act contrary to the general trend of a holy life. The possibility of such a single wrong act under a sudden temptation is implied in ii. 1. It does interrupt fellowship, but it does not necessarily extinguish spiritual life and forfeit sonship to God, if there is an immediate resort to the "Advocate with the Father." The essence of the new life is love flowing Godward and manward. Anything which stops the flow of this current is fatal to the divine life. A single inadvertent sin, like a backward eddy, does not arrest the onward moving river, though it impedes its progress. Yet it remains true that there cannot be --what the agnostics professed -- a sinning companionship with the sinless Christ. "He receiveth sinners" for conversion and not for complacent communion.

"Hath not seen Him." This seems to indicate that some teachers were giving authority to their destructive errors by appealing to the fact that they had looked upon the person of Christ. But Paul teaches us that there is no saving effect of such a sight. (2 Cor. v. 16.)

"Neither knoweth Him." "The point regarded," say Dean Alford and Bishop Westcott, "is present and not past." Whatever sympathetic intimacy with Christ he may have formerly had, it is certain that he who is now in a course of sin is a stranger to Him.

7. "Let no man lead you astray." This caveat relates especially to such misconceptions of Christian truth as lead to unrighteous conduct. Action follows opinion. "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he." This is seen in the derivation of the word "miscreant" from two Latin words, "minus" and "credo," signifying misbeliever. Orthodoxy is not saving, but it is the appointed medium of salvation.

"He that doeth righteousness." Whose entire activity is prompted by righteousness in its completeness and unity. Character underlies conduct.

"Even as He (Christ) is righteous." Well says Bishop Westcott: "The Christian's righteousness, of which Christ is the perfect type, must extend to the fulness of life." (John xiii. 15, xv. 12, xvii. 14, and notes on 16, iv. 17.) Christ's earthly life is the complete model of right action under all possible conditions.

8. "Is of the devil." Not by creation, nor by generation, for the devil has neither created nor begotten anybody. But he who imitates the devil in his disposition and deeds, in Hebrew phrase, is of him, or by a still stronger metaphor, he is a child of the devil. Paul in his genesis of sin traces it back to Adam, but John goes back of the first parent, to the first tempter, Satan.

"Sinneth from the beginning." The present tense denotes incessant action. The first human being soon discovered that he was between two antagonistic forces -- sin and holiness -- and that he could not maintain a neutral position, but must link his destiny with one or the other of these hostile powers. He must affiliate with light or darkness. He cannot by combining them create a medium element in which to dwell.

"Destroy the works of the devil." The bent to sinning which Satan by tempting Adam and Eve to disobedience, induced in all their descendants. We cannot accept the declaration of some persons that "the works of the devil are the sins which he causes men to commit." Every sinner is the first cause, the cause uncaused, of his own sins. Hence his guilt is his own. The agency of Satan in giving a downward trend to human nature in the fall of Adam is the occasion of the voluntary sins of his posterity. The removal of this proclivity to sin called in theology original sin, or depravity, through faith in the blood of the Son of God producing entire sanctification is the destruction of the works of the devil. These are summed up in "original sin," which is their occasion. When men sin they indorse the devil's works and make them their own, from the guilt of which their only release is through the atonement in Christ as a conditional, substitute for punishment.

9. "Whosoever is begotten of God." Literally "has been begotten," implying that he still remains a child of God, his faith retaining the continuous efficacy of the divine birth.

"Doeth no sin." Literally "is not committing sin." Says Athenagoras: "Know ye that those whose ideal standard of life is the character of God will never enter upon the purpose of even the least sin."

"He cannot sin." Rather, "be sinning." A course of wilful sin is incompatible with continued sonship or likeness to God. Moral contradictions cannot co-exist in one person. He cannot be a thief and an honest

man at the same time; neither can he be sinning and a true child of God at the same instant. Persistence in sinning extinguishes sonship or similarity to God, loving what He loves and hating what He hates. So long as love to God is the undiminished motive there can be no career of sin. But faith may become weak and love may decline. Then under the pressure of temptation the child of God may commit a single sin, as ii.1 implies, and have recourse to the righteous Advocate with the Father, and thus retain his birthright in the kingdom of God. Or he may with Judas pass out of the light into so total an eclipse of faith as to enter upon a returnless course of sin entirely sundering him from the family of God, and enrolling him as a "son of perdition," a "child of the devil," whose characteristics he has permanently taken on. Says Bishop Westcott: "The ideas of divine sonship and sin are mutually exclusive. As long as the relationship with God is real, sinful acts are but accidents." Sin in the proper acceptance of the term always implies the consent of the will, and therefore can never be an accident. Yet it is possible that an improper word may leap suddenly from the tongue of a true child of God or a sinful act which does not proceed from love may escape the will, while the deliberate purpose is righteous, and the ruling principle is love. This explains the dangerous phrase, "accidental sin," an isolated act contrary to the tenor of a holy life. This comes very near to Wesley's definition of an infirmity, an omission, or inadvertent wrong act springing from some weakness, or defect in a person whose character is rooted in love to God and man. Says Augustine: "There is a certain sin which he who has been born of God cannot commit, and because this is not committed the rest are excused. What is this sin? It is to do contrary to the command of Christ, contrary to the New Testament." So far as love, the new commandment (John xiii. 34) is the determining element in Christian character, Augustine agrees with Wesley that a thousand infirmities, errors of judgment and so called sins of ignorance may consist with perfect love, and are daily covered by the blood of Christ.

10. "In this the children of God are manifest." They are known by their victory over sin. Absence of sinning is their characteristic mark. "The children of the devil" are known by sinning. They who by evil conduct take on a likeness to the devil are called in this unique phrase children of the devil.

"Doeth not righteousness." This negation of doing implies that a Christian cannot be passive; he must be active in deed and in word. A nominal Christian is a delusion. "To do righteousness is a necessity for him who has been born of God."

"He that loveth not his brother" -- his spiritual brother who wears, at least in outline, the image of Christ whom no one can love while failing to love him who bears His image, whether rich or poor, learned or ignorant, white or black. "If you fail to possess love and have everything else, nothing is profitable to thee. If you have not other things, have love and you have fulfilled the law." (Augustine.) Righteousness is the fulfilment of the divine law in its requirement of duties to God and to man. Holiness is conformity to the divine character. Perfect love is the root and loftiest embodiment of both righteousness and holiness.

11. "This is the message." The mandatory announcement. "That we love." In order that we love one another. Love is not merely the content of the message, but its purpose to incite self-sacrificing love in the hearts of believers. Christ's incarnation, life, preaching, example and death all aim to implant in human hearts that love which proves its genuineness by self-sacrifice. A self-indulgent disciple of Christ is a contradiction.

"Heard from the beginning." Of Christ's public teaching. "If the world hateth you." The "it" does not intimate a doubt; it assumes a fact. The emphatic word in the original is "hateth." In his banishment to Patmos John had fathomed its meaning.

12. "Not as Cain was of the evil one." The words "who" and "that" in the A. V. are not in the Greek. John goes back of Adam and Eve, the first human sinners to the first angelic sinner. Paul traces sin only to Adam. Cain manifested the Satanic spirit of hatred. Hence he belonged to the party of the wicked one, and, unless he sought forgiveness he will share the punishment of the devil. (Matt. xxv. 41.)

"Slew his brother." This is a terrible verb, literally signifying "to cut the throat," to butcher as an animal.

"And wherefore?" When one hates another because he has wronged him we call it a human sin, because it has an apparent reason; but hatred on account of righteousness is diabolism. Augustine traces the temptation of Cain to envy, a human sin most closely bordering on the Satanic: "He who envies does not love. The sin of the devil is in him. . . . For he fell and envies him who stands, not because he wishes to hurl him down in order that he himself may stand, but in order that he may not fall alone."

13. "Marvel not . . . if the world hate you." In the order of the original the word "hate" is accentuated. That there should be hatred of holiness instead of admiring love would awaken astonishment in all unfallen beings. This hatred of goodness shows the depth of the world's depravity. The "if" does not intimate a doubt, but rather it announces an existing fact. Hatred is the characteristic of the world. The connection of thought is that terrible as Cain's history is, it is a syllabus of the history of the world, a conspectus of its follies and crimes.

"Brethren." This endearing title is used nowhere else in this Epistle. In ii. 7 the R. V. has "beloved." "Brethren" expresses equality; "children," dependence.; and "little ones, " subordination, immaturity and prospective growth.

14. "We know." The stress in the Greek is upon the pronoun "we." This knowledge is experimental and intuitive under the illumination of the Holy Spirit. The spiritual sensibilities feel the chill of the dead world -- dead because of the absence of love divine, the principle of spiritual life. True Christians know that they have passed out of this deadly chill into the warmth and sunshine of the new life. The verb is in the present tense. The new sphere of being begins this side of the grave, as well as the knowledge that we have entered into it.

"Death . . . life." There are but two spheres, death and life. There is no middle condition. All men are spiritually dead or spiritually alive. The dead will remain dead until they actively pass out of death by laying hold of Christ, the resurrection and the life. In probation the dead have the gracious ability to hear the voice of the Son of God, and "they that hear (obey) shall live." Persevering obedience is life everlasting. All power in the sinner to move Godward is of grace through the atonement, and this power is bestowed upon all. (Luke xxiv. 47; Acts xvii. 30.) The other terms used by John which admit of no middle term are the truth and a lie, light and darkness, believing and unbelief, or disobedience, children of God and children of the devil, love of the world and love of God, denying Christ and confessing Him. This use of mutually exclusive terms John learned from his Master, who declared that all who heard His words would build on the rock or on the sand, and would arise from their graves unto the resurrection of life or to the resurrection of damnation, and be separated into only two classes, the sheep and the goats, and receive one of two sentences, eternal life or eternal punishment. The destiny of the entire human family is represented by the wheat gathered into the garner and the tares thrust into the furnace, the good fish cast into vessels and the bad cast away, the wise virgins admitted to the feast and the foolish inexorably shut out.

"The brethren." We know because we love. The heart is the organ of a more excellent knowledge than the intellect. Says Pascal, "The things of this world must be known in order to be loved, but the things of God must be loved in order to be known." "It is significant that the first title given to the body of believers after the ascension is 'the brethren' (Acts i. 15, R. V.); and from this time onwards it occurs in all the groups of apostolic writings." (Westcott.) Because of the many infirmities which obscure the glory of brotherly love Augustine says, "It flourishes as yet in the winter; the root is vigorous, but its branches are dry. It is the inner pith which flourishes -- within are the leaves and the fruit, but they await the summer." "Abideth in death." John assumes that Christian love and spiritual life are convertible terms, the absence of one proves the non-existence of the other. An ancient writer pertinently inquires, "If he who loves not abides in death, in what kind of a death does he who hates abide?" John has just emphasized the hatred of the world toward the Christian brotherhood.

15. "Every one that hateth." Irrespective of his Christian profession hatred of his brother in Christ is essentially murder, according to Christ's definition in Matt. v. 22, the R. V. omitting "without cause." Bede intimates that this crime evidently lurks not only in him who pursues his brother with a sword, but also in him who pursues him with hatred.

"Eternal life . . . abiding." This implies what is often expressed, that eternal life begins in the present life of the persevering believer. (John v. 24, vi. 40, 47, 54; 1 John v. 11, 12.) These texts, proving the unbroken continuity of eternal life, broken by nothing except wilful sin, afford a convincing answer to the doctrine of unconsciousness of the dead, for to have life is to have conscious well-being or happiness and not mere existence.

16. "We know love." The Greek word is "agape," love founded on the perception of excellent qualities. This word belongs to the Bible exclusively. It was invented for use in Revelation because the other Greek words had been degraded and polluted. Eros was so completely debased as to be expressive of the foulest lust; and philia, the love of kindred and of marriage, had become too much tainted to express the holy and disinterested love of God for his Son, and of both for men created in the divine image. Love is evinced by self-denial. Love sacrifices itself to its object, while lust sacrifices its object to itself.

"Laid down his life." This phrase in the New Testament is found only in John's writings. See John x. 11, 15, 17, xiii. 37, 38, xv. 13. It may have been derived from the custom of laying down the price of purchased goods, or for the ransom of a captive. (Matt. xx. 28.) Another aspect of the voluntary surrender of life is that it was necessary in order to become conditionally the life of the world. (John vi. 51.) The life of the God-man could be appropriated by faith and become eternal in the believer only after death had set it free.

"Our lives for the brethren." If by this means we can save them. This does not imply the possibility of one man's making an atonement for another, but rather the duty of interposing in his behalf even at the risk of losing his own life. When a promising convert in whom John felt a deep interest backslid and at last joined a band of robbers, there is a credible tradition that John mounted a horse and went to the mountains to find and reclaim the young apostate, and tearfully and successfully entreated him, saying, "Could you be saved in no other way I would willingly undergo thy death as Jesus Christ underwent ours; in behalf of thee will I give my life." The argument seems to require that so great, a sacrifice as life itself, if needful to save anybody, whether a brother in Christ, a Jew, or a pagan, is required of those who follow the example of Him who died for us "while we were yet sinners." But since this is a test of our love which lies out of the way of common experience, John suggests a more practicable test in the next verse, the distribution of our money and goods for the relief of the needy brother.

17. "But whoso hath the world's goods." Smaller sacrifices than that of the life will be often required. How do we endure this every-day test in a world made poor by sin?

"Shutteth up his compassion." A. V., "bowels." The ancients, who located the various mental activities in different bodily organs, ascribed pity to the bowels. Wherever it is thus figuratively used the R. V. has the mental affection instead of the physical organ as in Luke i. 78; 2 Cor. vi. 12, vii. 15; Phil. i. 8, ii. 1; Col. iii. 12; Philemon 7, 12, 20. To shut up the bowels is to tighten the purse strings against a fellow Christian in undoubted need of food, raiment, shelter or passage money to the distant home. This does not require indiscriminate giving to all those strangers known as tramps who, with narcotic or alcoholic breath, profess to be members of the same religious denomination with yourself. Says Wesley on Matt. v. 42, "Give and lend to any so far (but no farther, for God never contradicts Himself) as is consistent with thy engagements to thy creditors, thy family, and the household of faith."

Hence St. John's test of a true Christian is sometimes quite complicated and difficult of application, and it may in some instances sorely distress a highly sensitive Christian. For the relief of such the twentieth verse was written.

18. "Neither with the tongue," which is here marked by the article as the special instrument of hypocritical love. Love "in word" may be genuine, but too weak to prompt to self-sacrificing acts.

19. "Hereby shall we know." The future tense implies a condition soon to be expressed in the next verse. "That we are of the truth." That we have appropriated Christ who is the truth, the reality in contrast with all illusions; the antitype answering to all the Old Testament types, the substance as opposed to all shadows; the Life standing over against all kinds of deaths, whether physical or spiritual. To be of the truth is the same as to be a child of God, which is a concrete statement of the identical fact.

"And shall assure our hearts." We shall persuade our hearts is the Greek, in the sense of "still and tranquillize their fears and misgivings."

20. "Whereinsoever our hearts condemn us" because we are in fellowship with God, and that fact assures us of His sovereign mercy, as implied in the words, "because God is greater The context requires that God's supreme sovereignty over the whole man should be regarded under the aspect of love, as exercised for the calming of human doubts. The supposition that 'greater' means more searching and authoritative than the heart is at variance with the tenor of the passage and also with the natural sense of 'greater.'" (Bishop Westcott.) The perplexities which arise in a sensitive Christian conscience in the matter of administering to the necessities of saints have already been spoken of in our note on verse 17. Says Jelf, "A Christian heart burdened with a sense of its own unworthiness forms an unfavorable opinion of the state of the soul and pronounces against its salvation. If we are conscious of practically loving the brethren, we can adduce this as evidence of the contrary, and give the heart ground to change its opinion, and to reassure itself. Any one who has had experience of the doubts and fears which spring up in a believer's heart from time to time, of whether he is or is not in a state of condemnation, will feel the need and the efficacy of this test of faith and means of assurance."

This exegesis proceeds upon the supposition that a morbid or unenlightened conscience may erroneously condemn itself in some sophistical or false reasoning respecting some question, especially in withholding alms from a doubtful applicant professing to be a Christian. Under such circumstances the accusing conscience may find relief in the thought that God, who in His greatness reads the secrets of the heart, sees that the intention of that heart is to love God supremely and his fellowman as himself. "According to

the explanation given, we are supposed to have in the consciousness of brotherly love the means whereby we may allay the reproaches of our conscience. The expression 'because God is greater' must, as containing matter of consolation, exhibit not the greater strictness of God, but His greater tenderness." (Haupt.) It is true that the gentleness of God is not in all cases regarded as a valid ground of consolation, but it is such when we consider the divine omniscience scanning the motives of those weakened and errant yet true Christians who have mistakenly made themselves worse than they really are.

21. "Beloved." An appropriate form of address where brotherly love is the special topic, and the fears, doubts and questionings of Christians anxious to ascertain their true standing before God's law are under consideration.

"Condemn us not." This does not result from insensibility to the guilt of sin and a light estimate of its heinousness, nor does it imply sinlessness, a term strictly applicable to no man on whom forgiven sin has left its scar in the form of crippled moral powers. But it does include conscious pardon and a sense of sonship to God through "the Spirit of the adoption crying in the heart, Abba, Father," imparting peace and assurance.

"We have boldness," as in iv. 17; Acts iv. 13, 29, 31; Eph. iii. 12; Phil. i. 20; 1 Tim. iii. 13; Heb. x. 19. The Greek is a word composed of two, "all" and "say" express all your wants without reserve. "Toward God." The thought is of the freedom of a dutiful son in his approach to his loving father, and not of the reluctance of the accused to appear before his judge.

22. So closely connected is this verse with the twenty-first that only a comma should separate them, as in Westcott and Hort, Alford and others. We would call attention to the fact that this verse is not a description of saving faith, but rather the faith of assurance. A penitent sinner seeking forgiveness cannot exercise a faith which is stimulated by reflecting on a previous obedient life, for he comes confessing that he is ungodly unto Him "who justifieth the ungodly." (Rom. iv. 5.)

"Whatsoever we ask we receive." Both verbs are in the present tense, denoting what is continuous and habitual in the actual present experience of believers. Without exception every prayer is answered and every request is granted. Says Augustine, "Let us note a difference between God's answers. For we find certain persons not answered according to their wish are answered in a way which promotes their best good, and others answered as they desire are not answered according to their best good."

"Because we keep His commandments." "Obedience is not alleged as the ground, but as the assurance, of the fulfilment. The answer to prayer is given not as a reward for meritorious action, but because the prayer itself rightly understood coincides with God's will. Comp. John viii. 29, xi. 42. The sole object of the believer is to do thoroughly the part which has been assigned to him; his petitions are directed to this end and so are necessarily granted. Comp. John xv. 7." (Bishop Westcott.) This is only another way of saying, "We know that God heareth not sinners; but if any man be a worshipper of God and do His will, him He heareth." (John ix. 31.) Jesus Christ testifies to the same truth, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you." (John xv. 7.) Believers who are in perfect accord with God's will, will ask only for what is in His will, and this they will infallibly receive. God answers all the real prayer that is offered, and is waiting for more. In explaining the apparent theological difficulty in this verse that good works are the meritorious ground on which favorable answers to prayer are given, Dean Alford says, "Out of Christ there are no good works at all; entrance into Christ is not won nor merited by them. In Christ, every work done of faith is good and pleasing to God. The doing of such works is the

working of the life of Christ in us; they are its sign, they are its fruits. Whatever is attributed to them as an efficient cause is attributed not to us, but to Him whose fruits they are."

"Things pleasing." A fragment of the gospel descriptive of Christ's perfect accord with His Father. "Because the things pleasing to Him I always do," is quoted by John as descriptive of the actual life of believers while in this world. It is true that 'always' is not expressed, but it is implied in continuous tense, 'we are doing.'"

23. "And this is His commandment." Note the singular. This summary of all God's previous commands, supreme love to God, appears in this last restatement of His law in the form of the obligation to believe on the name of His adorable Son, and love to our neighbor as to ourselves is found in these words, "and love one another."

This last statement of God's law made for all the coming ages magnifies faith, the first place in this Epistle in which it is mentioned. Here we have a complete answer to those contradictory and shallow people who insist that if we do what is about right it does not matter what we believe. Rather it is necessary to believe in order to do what is right.

"On the name of His Son." The name stands for the whole personality, His life, miracles, discourses, death, resurrection, ascension and gift of the Paraclete. True faith lays hold of Him as the only Saviour, casting away every other plea. "The full title, 'His Son, Jesus Christ,' is a compressed creed, the whole sum of the manifold revelations gathered up together so as to form one supreme revelation." (Westcott.)

24. In this verse we have a general return to the keynote of the Epistle, abide in me, just as the former part of the Epistle, ii. 28, concluded. Brotherly love is the most conspicuous example and proof of two inseparable facts, obedience to God and abiding in Him. Abiding in God is not a quiescent and passive state. It is a strenuous and continuous effort, first to ascertain God's commands and then to do them. Such a person abides in God. This mutual abiding shows the strength of the Christian's fortress and the wealth of his privilege. The Omnipotent dwells in the believer, and the believer dwells in the Gibraltar of God's strength. Says Bede, "Let God be a house for thee and thou shalt be a house for God; abide in God and let God abide in thee." This mutual indwelling is by the Holy Spirit. The believer is conscious of His incoming as the witness of adoption, and in single experiences or crises in the spiritual life, such as a sudden and perfect release from some old bondage, and most notably in the act of entire sanctification and in that perfect love of which this act is the gateway. This assures the advanced Christian beyond a doubt of God's delightful fellowship. "By the Spirit which He gave us." This is the first mention of the Spirit in the Epistle. It is remarkable that the adjective "Holy" joined to Spirit never is found in John's Epistles nor in Revelation. The time when the Spirit was given was not limited to pentecost. Every one may by faith claim a personal pentecost, as marked in individual experience as the day of pentecost was in the history of the apostolic church.

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