

ARE YOU REALLY BORN AGAIN?
(Selected passages from 1 John)

Intro: For the past two Sundays we have considered from the Epistles of Peter what we have called, Incentives For Holy Living. We have seen all of these incentives in connection with Peter's emphasis regarding the word, salvation. He writes to a suffering people encouraging them to think of the relation between their present circumstances and God's finished work of salvation in them.

Remember the expressions:

- (1) "Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5).
- (2) "Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls" (1 Pet. 1:9).

On this basis Peter gives four reasons why we should be holy:

- (1) Because God is holy, and we are to be like He is.
- (2) Because a holy life is the most effective witness to others.
- (3) Because a holy life is a good life.
- (4) Because judgment is in store for this world, and this is the only reasonable life to live.

This morning I want to take you to the first Epistle of John to an entirely different emphasis regarding salvation.

In his epistles John never uses the word salvation; he never ~~speaks~~ of being saved.

Once he speaks of Christ as Saviour:

"And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the World" (1 Jn. 4:14).

However, John uses another expression which is a synonym for salvation. He speaks of being "born of God". Including "born of him" in 1 John 2:29, this expression is found seven times in the epistle. The other six references are: 3:9 (2x); 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18.

To be saved is to be born again, and to be born again is to be saved, but a change in terminology

suggests a change in emphasis.

Peter is dealing with the problem, Why do Christians suffer? Or, How can we face our trials believing that there is some purpose behind them?

John, on the other hand, is concerned with the question: How can you be sure that you are a Christian? Or, to state it another way, Do you have eternal life? Are you spiritually alive?

How are we going to check this?

Physically, a person does not change by becoming a Christian. He may appear happier, but this is not always a legitimate test because there are happy people in the world who are not Christians. And often there are times when a Christian is not happy.

When a person becomes a Christian, he still looks the same, he still needs to eat and sleep, he still has problems, he still must work. There are multitudes of ways in which a Christian is no different from one who is ^{not} a Christian.

Where, then, do you look for differences?

Before answering this question, let us look at two possible areas where the answer might be found.

1 John 5:13 states clearly the purpose of this letter. His concern, as I have stated, is to help Christians be sure that they are Christians. Or, again to state it differently, he wants to help every Christian to know that he has eternal life, that he has been "born of God", that he is spiritually alive.

To illustrate-- When I was born the doctor who attended my mother was a man by the name of Dr. Janes. I was the first of seven children in our family, and he took care of my mother prior to and during the birth of each one of us. But directly after I was born my mother started taking me to another doctor whose name was Dr. Clay. Dr. Clay was a pediatrician. Dr. Janes was an obstretician.

Without oversimplifying the work of these two men let me say that Dr. Janes' concern for me before I was born, during my birth, and immediately afterward was that I would be alive. He wanted to be sure that I

had physical life.

But when he turned me over to Dr. Clay, Dr. Clay's concern was what kind of physical life I had. Although I don't remember it, I am sure he weighed me, and measured me, and checked me all the ways a doctor does every time my mother took me to see him. He wanted to be sure that I was growing properly, and that there was no disease developing which would threaten my life.

Both doctors were concerned with my life, but their interests were different. One was concerned with the beginning of my life; the other was concerned with its growth. I realize that the two cannot be entirely separated from each other, but I want to establish this point.

To return to this first epistle of John—John's concern is not that of a pediatrician. He is not concerned about growth at this point, or about the fulness or fruitfulness of their lives; he is concerned that they have life, and that they know how to be sure that they have life.

He writes as a spiritual obstetrician telling how he as a physician of souls is able to know when one is really "born of God" into the family of God.

To show the contrast, Paul in 1 Corinthians and in Hebrews (if he wrote it) is concerned about the kind of life, the growth of the children of God. He was writing to Christians whose growth had been stunted. But he is not worried about whether or not they are Christians.

But John is.

If not, why would he write,

"He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar . . ."

If a man is lying when he says, I know Him, then it means that he does not know him, and is not a child of God.

Note also:

"He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now."

If he is in darkness, he is not a child of God.

So John makes it perfectly clear that one of the major

ways we usually determine whether or not we or someone else is a Christian is not, by itself, a true test, i.e., claims we make for ourselves.

We can be so naive, so superficial about these things. It has gotten so now that if a man attends church faithfully he is considered a Christian.

You may go to church because you are a Christian, but going to church doesn't make you one. The only thing that your being here is morning proves is that you are here and not some place else. It doesn't prove that you are a Christian. This is not a legitimate test.

The ~~same~~ thing applies to ^{giving} money, or offices in the church.

How can we know about ourselves, and what evidences are we to look for in the lives of others?

John gives us three tests to show when a person has been actually born of God, to prove that the experience of spiritual birth is something that has already taken place.

The three tests are:

- (1) The moral test.
- (2) The emotional test.
- (3) The doctrinal test.

Let us consider them in this order because this is the order in which John deals with them.

- I. THE MORAL TEST. Read 1 John 2:29; 3:7-10a (down to "not of God"); 5:18.

Before we attempt to explain these statements, or to explain them away, let us solemnly remind ourselves that this is the Word of God, and therefore, whether we like it or not, it is true.

John approaches it first positively, then negatively. If you are born of God you will do righteousness, and if you are born of God you will not sin.

1 John 2:29 is the first mention of spiritual birth in the epistle, and this is something of a keynote which lays the foundation for the whole subject. WHEN A PERSON IS BORN OF GOD THERE IS AN IMMEDIATE CHANGE IN THE MORAL

ATMOSPHERE OF HIS LIFE. He begins to do righteousness; his attitude toward sin is changed.

But we need to define these terms, and we need to look carefully at the way John speaks in verb form of doing righteousness and sinning.

What is righteousness?

Two preceding statements in the epistle may help us.

Read 1 John 2:1, 2. Note that here Jesus Christ is called "the righteous". It is only on this basis that He can be our advocate with God when we sin. Thus, whatever righteousness and sin mean, they are certainly the opposites of each other.

Furthermore, we can quickly see that righteousness is good, and sin is bad.

Read also 1 John 1:5. "This then is the message" indicates the basic fact of the Epistle. Light is a symbol in many languages which refers to that which is pure, right, holy.

So, if "God is light", and if "Jesus Christ" is "the righteous", then for us to be righteous means that we are to be like they are. Righteousness begins to take on the meaning of that which is like God.

In the etymology of the word we learn that it means that which is in accord with some rule, some standard. In this case the rule or standard is a Person: GOD. The emphasis in the word is very definitely positive. If I am to be righteous, I must take on the characteristics of God Himself.

On the other hand, what is sin?

We have already seen that it is the opposite of Righteousness, but what else can we learn?

The Greek word for sin means to miss a mark, or to wander, or to violate a law. It can be through ^{from a} ignorance, carelessness, or in rebellion. ^{path} But it clearly indicates a failure to achieve the purpose for which human life was intended.

This all means that morality is not a relative matter, as we are being taught today, but it is an absolute thing. Moral standards are just as unchangeable as the

character of God. He is the One who determines what is right and what is wrong in human experience. If a thing is in harmony with God, it is righteous; if it is not, it is sin. And let us not let men lead us to believe otherwise.

Sin is not determined by popular vote, nor by a judgment of the Supreme Court of the United States.

God is the One who says what sin is, and the place He tells us is in the Bible, which is His Word.

Yet the world tells us today there is no God, that we are free to set our own standards, we are our own masters, our own judges.

But our courts, our penal institutions, our coroners, our broken homes, the ruined lives which are multiplying at a most alarming rate all witness to the fact that sin is sin because it is contrary to God and that the wages of sin is death—spiritual, and often physical.

Let us never get away from these truths.

But before we close this part, what does John mean that "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin."

If this is true, why did he say in verse 1 of chapter 2, "And if any man sin," and in chapter 1, verse 8, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves," and in verse 9, "If we confess our sins, . . .?"

It is because in the life of a Christian you face these two facts:

- (1) It is always possible for a Christian to commit an act of sin, to fall into sin.. The Bible gives no hope that we can in this life get to the place where it is impossible for us to sin.

But there is another truth that goes right along with it.

- (2) It is impossible for a Christian to live in sin. This is the moral test which proves the reality of the new birth.

A newborn Christian will not be a perfect Christian, but he will be a morally different person. He is going to stop doing a lot of the things he has been doing, and he is going to start doing a lot of things he has never done. And he will not be left to himself to decide. God has given us His Word. This is the book which settles all moral questions. The first proof that one is a child of

God is a desire to become like God and to avoid all that He calls sin.

Can you pass the moral test? Does sin bother you? Do you yearn to be righteous?

When we see this evidence in our lives, and in the lives of others, this is a sign that life, eternal life, is present.

II. THE EMOTIONAL TEST (4:7-11).

There are three sections where the subject of love comes up for discussion:

- (1) The first is rather sporadic, beginning in 2:5, referred to but not mentioned in 2:7, 8, then it follows in 2:10, 15, and 3:1.
- (2) Cf. 3:10-24.
- (3) Cf. 4:7-5:3.

The last is where John reaches the highest peak in the Epistle. Some feel that it is the highest peak of Scripture. It is surely the greatest statement regarding the love of God with only 1 Corinthians 13 as a possible equal.

John's reasoning in 4:7-11 is easy to follow, and gives the very heart of his insistence that love is one of the three distinguishing marks of a Christian.

A. The exhortation stated (v. 7a).

Obviously this must be considered in the light of all that has preceded it, even~~ing~~ back to John 13:34, 35, but let it suffice to mention here that a Christian is identified,

- not by his avowed love for God,
- nor by his efforts to show love for the people of the world,

but

- by the love which he shows for other believers.

Vv. 1-6 show that in relation to the world, the believer faces division and opposition, but beginning with v. 7, in his relations with other believers there must be unity which is manifested by love.

In spite of all that has been said up to this point, it needs to be stated again, and re-stated constantly.

B. The explanation (vv. 7b, 8).

These two verses explain the source of love and the significance of love.

The source is seen in the statements,

- "love is of God," and
- "God is love."

Now the second statement does not mean that love is God (and the Greek forbids such an interchange of words), just as the statement in 1:5, "God is light", does not mean that light is God.

Such unwarranted liberties with Scripture have led to some of the most serious of heresies.

The statement, God is love, means that one of the chief attributes of God is love, and that the love which John is calling for is a love which still has its origin in God, and it is found in Him in an inexhaustible supply.

He is not all love and more than He is all light. He is light and love. But if one claims to be His child, he must display this part of the divine nature just as he must display the other: righteousness.

Again, in these verses, John brings the full force of the Greek verb into play. It could read as follows:

Every one who habitually loves is born of God, and continues to increase in the knowledge of God. But he that does not habitually love, has never known God (aorist), for God is love.

So, just as it is impossible for a person to be born again and to still feel the same way about sin, so it is impossible for a person to be born again without manifesting love—and this love is directed especially toward the people of God.

Do you remember when this change came about in your own life? Before, you couldn't think of anything worse than being with a group of Christians; now it is the highlight of your life.

But now, what do we mean by love? Who is going to define it.

Surely we can't turn to the world for a definition

because the world often describes love as lust, and John specifically states that "the lust of the flesh" is "not of the Father, but is of the world" in 2:15.

What is love?

John answers the question by giving us

C. The illustration (vv. 9, 10). Also by using *ἀγάπη*

These verses have been described as twin verses because they seem to say the same thing. But there is a difference between them.

Both of them describe the love of God which, incidentally, we are to manifest, but

- v. 9 describes the magnitude of His love, while
- v. 10 describes the priority of His love.

However, we can be even more specific in seeing the details of God's love as John describes it.

- (1) The love of God was in existence before it was displayed.

Cf. Jer. 31:3, "Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love..."

Also, Eph. 3:17, 18, "being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the , , . length . . "

- (2) The love of God demanded expression.

It is impossible to experience the love of God without wanting to express it. "For God so loved . . . that He gave . . ."

- (3) The love of God did not draw back in the face of the greatest possible sacrifice.

"His only begotten Son." God had none other like him--no replacement. Just as it was after was sent away that God asked Abraham for Isaac when Isaac was all he had left.

- (4) The love of God was undeserved, unmerited, even unwanted. " . . . into the world . . . not that we loved God . . . "

Cf. Rom. 5:8.

Remember that the love of God is not mentioned in the Bible until Deut., ~~Exodus~~ and the only reason given for God's love for us is stated in 7:7, 8.

- (5) Finally, the love of God had a purpose. It is stated in two different ways in these twin verses:

- "that we might live through him."
- "to be the propitiation for our sins."

Can there be any doubt as to what John is talking about after this vivid description?

This is the Bible's definition of the love of God, the kind of love which has been shed ~~abroad~~ in our hearts according to Rom. 5:5, the love we are to manifest for each other—coming from God, filling our lives, shown forth through us.

And, then, as if John sensed that some might feel that he was asking too much, we have, in the light of these verses

- D. The exhortation re-stated: "Beloved, if God so loved the world, we ought also to love one another." This is v. 11.

So many things can be said about this, but it is enough for us to see that the love of God was not withheld from the world, and so we should not withhold it from one another.

III. Moses pleading for Israel:

"And Moses returned unto the Lord, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin--; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written." (Ex. 32:31,32)

How typical of other words which were to be spoken a millenium and a half later:

"O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Mt. 26:39).

This is the mark of a child of God!

III. THE DOCTRINAL TEST (1 John 5:1a).

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The three tests we find in the First Epistle of John are not either/or tests; they are both/and tests. In other words, a person must pass all three tests in order to qualify as a child of God. This does mean that they are perfect with regard to these issues, but that there are these evidences present in their lives.

Just as there were three sections in the Epistle which had to do with love, so there are three that have to do with doctrine. They are: 2:18-28; 4:1-6; 5:1-15. In the

latter passage we have the test of doctrine intermingled somewhat with the test of love, but the emphasis is clearly on doctrine.

At the outset it is well worth noting that John would not subscribe to the tendency among religious leaders today with regard to doctrine. Today we are told that it is not important, that it is divisive, that we must learn to de-emphasize doctrine if we are to ever achieve church unity. This is the theme song of the ecumenical movement.

Some of this was evident at the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. which met in Columbus, Ohio in May of this year. During this time a new confession of faith was debated. The new statement of faith contains

- no statement of the doctrine of the Trinity,
- no statement of the deity of Christ, and consequently no statement of the Virgin Birth of Christ,
- and no statement of the inspiration of Scripture.

This is typical of what has already happened in other groups.

How contrary to all of this is John's statement in our text: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God."

In considering this statement, let us note first

A. The grammar.

Without going into unnecessary details, please note that there are ^{three} ~~two~~ verbs in this statement: "believeth . . . is . . . is born".

In the original language the first two verbs are in the present tense; the third is a perfect passive.

John is explaining a third way we can tell that a person has been born again.

Any child who has learned his English lesson knows that the passive voice is used when the subject is acted upon. So to speak of the new birth in this way means that we do not cause ourselves to be born again. No, someone else does this for us. It points to the fact that the new birth is not a human work, but a work of God. He is "born of God".

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The perfect tense, on the other hand, speaks of something that has been completed in the past.

Actually a better translation for "is born of God" would be has been born of God.

So putting it all together John is talking about a person who, sometime in the past, has experienced a work of God in his life so that now, at the present time, he has been born of God, and so is a child of God.

It is a work of God, and it is a finished work of God.

But how can you be sure that this is true?

This takes us to the first part of the verse.

The fact that at some time in the past this person was born of God is manifest in the present by ~~the~~ another fact which can be tested, namely, that he continues to believe something!

He believes what?

That "Jesus is the Christ".

So, I can accept the fact that a certain person was born of God sometime in the past and that this was a completed work IF at the present time this person continues to maintain faith in the fact that Jesus is the Christ.

John is not setting aside doctrine, nor is he setting aside experience. But he is using the present experience of believing to test the reality of the claim that in the past this person was born of God.

You see--John does not emphasis what happened at such-and-such a time in the past; he uses the present to prove that somewhere in the past a work was done.

So what a person believes is important, especially what he believes about Jesus Christ. THIS IS THE HEART OF THE MATTER.

But, to understand John, we must now go on to explain

B. The meaning of "Jesus is the Christ".

This is the basic statement of faith of one who is really born again.

What does it mean? What is involved in this statement, "Jesus is the Christ"?

In Matthew, chapter 1, verse 16, we read:

"And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."

All through the Gospels He is referred to primarily as Jesus because this was His name. ". . . and thou shalt call his name Jesus. . ." (Matt. 1:21).

The name Jesus indicates that He was a human being, a man who walked upon the earth.

Not even His enemies denied His humanity.

Men still refer to Him by this name.

But let a word of warning be given here. Be careful about the person who never speaks of Him except by the name Jesus. It may be an indication that this is all that they believe about Him—that He was a man, and nothing more!

This is NOT what John is saying. He does not say that believing that there was a person in history named Jesus makes anyone a child of God.

There must be an abiding faith that "Jesus is the Christ".

What all does this mean?

I would suggest three basic truths:

- (1) It means a child of God is one who believes in the deity of Christ.

Cf. John 20:31; Matt. 16:16; 1 John 2:22, 23.

- (2) It means believe in the incarnation of Christ.

Cf. 1 John 4:2, 3.

Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, one Who had no human father, and one whose deity was not in the least affected by His becoming a man.

Do you believe this?

John says that anything less than this is "not of God" (1 John 4:3).

- (3) It means finally believe in the resurrection of Christ.

John's statement is that "Jesus IS the Christ", not that He once was, but is no longer.

And do you see what is involved in this?

Christ existed before He became a man as the Son of God, equal in nature with the Father.

He became a man without ceasing to be God.

He took our sins upon Himself, and was offered as a sacrifice.

He was raised from the dead and ascended back to the Father now as the God-Man, but with His deity unchanged—still the Son of God as He had been from all eternity past.

What tremendous truths are wrapped up in that little statement, "Jesus is the Christ"!

This is the doctrinal test—what a person continues to believe about Jesus Christ.

The person who rejects these truths cannot possibly be a Christian. You cannot be a Christian without the Christ of the Bible, and He is a Christ of absolute deity—throughout eternity and time.

Concl: And so we come to the end of the tests:

- (1) The test of righteousness—the moral test.
- (2) The test of love for the brethren—the emotional test.
- (3) The test of believe in the deity of Christ—the doctrinal test.

May I close with John's great climax: 1 John 5:11-13.