

Three Habits of the Child of God, I John 3:1-20

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Introduction

In 2016 we are talking about problems in the church that the Bible describes, and the solutions that the Bible commands. Problems in the church are a major theme in the Bible. Today's text shows us one problem, that sometimes Christians get disoriented and forget that we are the children of God. John sets up a contrast. When Christians remain oriented in Christ to our true status as children of God, we develop three habits: Of knowing God, of doing what is right, and of putting love for our fellow believers into action. The unbeliever, on the other hand, has the habits of ignoring God, of sinning, and of scorning the Children of God, or holding them in contempt, or actively opposing them and seeking them harm.

Between the Child of God and the unbeliever falls the shadow, and in that darkness lives the disoriented Christian. One commentary describes this disorientation as "a profound confusion of sinful conduct with righteousness." The disoriented Christian is one who falls out of one, two, or all of the habits of the child of God, and has all the habits of a worldly person. I believe that the problem the Church has with dis-oriented Christians is the reason John wrote this letter. He is stating the bottom line: If you hate your fellow believers you cannot pretend to be acting in your life in Christ, you cannot lie to yourself that you are living as a Child of God; but where there is repentance, there is also re-orientation.

Let us pray: God in Heaven, let the habits of your character come to flower within us, that our confidence in you may grow, and that the world may know that we are Christians by our knowledge of you, by our concern for what is right, and by our love, in Jesus' name.

1. Knowing God

John describes what a life patterned on the power of Jesus Christ looks like, starting with the promise in verse 1: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” This is then set in contrast with those of the world, that is unbelievers, who do not “know us,” that is those who are God’s children, because they did not know God.

The NIV here has an unfortunate gloss in verse 1, but still points to a sense of meaning that scholar Kenneth Wuest brought out many years ago, which is that as far as worldly people are concerned Christians might as well be from another planet. The Children of God are not possessed of the world’s values; we are possessed of the knowledge of God.

This might convict us of a problem as current to the church today as it was when John was writing: Being possessed of the knowledge of God, are we in the habit of knowing God? Are we as Christians in a habit of prayer? Are we as Christians opening God’s word and laying it upon our hearts? Are we as Christians walking with each other in relationships of accountability and mentoring with small groups, or godly spiritual directors, or mentors? With cyberspace the Bible is now more available and accessible than ever before, and it is being read less and less. We spend six hours of the day getting input from screens of every kind, and we don’t give God ten minutes on any day except Sunday.

Some find the Bible is hard to understand. So don’t read a pew edition, and don’t pretend you are alone on your walk with God. Get a study Bible from an evangelical perspective to answer some your questions, and find a prayer partner or get into a small group to talk over your other questions. The reason you don’t find these suggestions exciting is that you don’t “like” the Bible very much anyway, but take this challenge to heart: The reason you don’t like the Bible is that you don’t read it.

At some point this calendar year I hope to offer a study on reading the Bible with understanding. Some of you who are astute will see this as a way of teaching the basic doctrines of the Christian faith, and you will be half-right about that. But we already have taught that stuff. Membership classes, Confirmation, we cover that. But many of you do not realize that unless the basic doctrines of our faith are anchored in an understanding of the Bible itself, it is like laying hold of the ropes of a hot air balloon all by yourself instead of keeping it tied to its basket. You find that you get tired from trying to hold on to the faith of the Church in your own strength, and before you know it your knowledge of God is floating away on the winds of a storm in your life. God's Revealed Will, here in the scriptures, the Bible, this is the anchor for the faith of the Church. It is not and can never be the other way around. The habit of knowing God depends on the Bible being open in your life, not a decoration on a shelf or a link on a menu of apps.

2. Doing Right

The contrast between those who have the habit of knowing God and those who are unbelievers, is stated in verse 6: "No one who lives in God keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen God or known God." Now I read that and I panic because I know what is true in my life. Some of you read it and are bothered because you know some people who reject belief in Jesus but live as upstanding citizens and would be called "good people" according to the common sense definitions set forward by Confucius and Aristotle. Statements like this are hard to understand. When we read them we are tempted to close the Bible and shelve it.

Kenneth Wuest's comments helped me this week as he pointed out something that does not come out very well in the English. Wuest speaks of "habits." The child of God has an orientation in which the habit forms, first of knowing God, and second, of doing right. But what

is right is not always going to match what the world describes as “virtue.” Sometimes what is right in God’s eyes may be counter-cultural, yet that is the habit for the child of God regardless.

There are many people with no knowledge of God who will live by conformity to worldly standards of virtue, they vote and they pay their bills and they comply with their homeowner association rules. For many people life has worked out well, and they have found moral middle-class living to be more convenient for themselves than any other lifestyle, and more conducive to their own ambitions and sense of self-worth. There is satisfaction in being able to live a moral code that also serves one’s self-interest. But that is not the life of God. I have had conversations in which I discerned no orientation to Christ, and hence no ability to understand what missionaries do and why churches support them and why that’s important, or why not-for profit-benevolence ministries attract some of the best legal and business professionals away from the fortunes they might make if they served themselves, and provided the best for their families and paid a higher tax bracket. There is virtue in that. But is God in it?

John is not writing like Aristotle about virtue or vice, he is writing about the orientations of the children of God versus the orientations of an unbelieving world. For John there is a definite distinction, an US and a THEM. Right now this is very unpopular to talk about in our western culture, because the drawing of distinctions between people or groups has been seen as mean and wrong. In many cases that has been true; the world has made many distinctions for false reasons, which the Bible itself speaks against, as when a poor person is treated with contempt while a rich person is treated with honor. Now our society has moved too far in trying to remove all distinctions and categories.

No matter what the world thinks and its laws permit, as Christians it is our duty to know that there is a distinction between the US that are Children of God, and the THEM that are not

yet saved, that are spurning the gospel. If we lose that sense of distinction we lose our mission that says we, US, who are saved, need to bring light to THEM, who are lost. In order for the lost to be saved, the lost have to be told they are lost. That's not comfortable, and now our society is calling that bigotry. We are possessed of God as God's Children. We are ambassadors from God's Kingdom with a warning and an invitation, both, or we have no gospel and no mission. But we might as well be from another planet, for this knowledge of God and this habit of doing right which possesses us, is alien to our human natures and to our world. It comes from God.

As for these three habits, I believe that Doing Right is probably where the Children of God at Elgin Covenant are at your strongest. I would like to see more Bible knowledge among you, that is true. But when it comes to your involvement in your church and in your community, when it comes to your efforts to be salt and light not only in your families but also among the lost and the poor, I say be encouraged. Keep it up, for as long as God gives you strength.

3. Doing Love

In verse ten we read: **“This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God;”** -- right, we just covered that, but we read further – **“nor is anyone who does not love a fellow believer.”** We read on in verse 16, **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our fellow believers. If a person has material possessions and sees a fellow believer in need but has no pity for the fellow believer, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”**

Here is why I believe that John is writing to the disoriented Christian, the one who inhabits that shadow place between the Child of God and the unbeliever. John is setting forth

these absolutes in order to call forth fruits that are fitting of repentance, so that those in the church who need to repent of disorientation will do so and return to the habits that should be forming in the Children of God. He goes to the story of Cain and Abel to make his point. But Cain is not an unbeliever, Cain has frequent conversations with God. Cain is disoriented by his envy, which is the root of his wicked actions, and he is finally lost. The story of Cain brings it home the point that disoriented Christians do a lot of harm, both within the church, and also the church's witness to the world.

The New Testament makes it clear that problems of persecution are supposed to occur in one direction, and only one: Persecution and violence should always come from the non-believer against the believer, and from mobs or governments against the Church. The New Testament does not model a situation and call it good, where the believers go around like bullies in the world, trying to force unbelievers in all the places of worldly society such as the marketplace, the idol temples, the academies and the gymnasiums, to do things the way Christians do them.

But enter the disoriented Christian, who thinks that being a bully is the way to get things done in the world and also in the church. One of the reasons that so many Christians are so confused about the Bible and whether it is relevant today, is that for centuries Christians in western culture have used the Bible to justify being bullies. No wonder there is so much confusion. Many Christians over the last several years have begun to see that this is wrong and to repent of their behavior towards the world. But I would say that the problem is not the Bible and what it says: the problem is, and has always been, disorientation, when Christians have failed to foster the habits of the children of God, and continued in the habits of worldly people instead.

When Christians are mean to each other, or bitter and holding grudges over past hurts whether real or imagined, that is a sure sign of disorientation. I am not talking about having

disagreements. That is part of being limited and human and iron sharpening iron. I am talking about the active dislike taken for another which can come out in petty ways or can erupt in ugly ways, as when Cain erupted. Where are you today when it comes to loving the fellow believers? Is this your habit, or is there a need in your soul for repentance, reorientation, and reconciliation?

Love, for John, is not the absence of hate or the absence of disagreement. Love is itself positive and active. Love helps us recognize the needs in others and reach out in care, not only with a kind word, but also with actions as simple as holding a door, or giving place in line for the food during fellowship hour. Actions of love get more complicated: picking someone up from the airport, providing a night of baby-sitting for a couple that needs alone time, sharing old furniture with someone starting out from scratch in a new place, visiting someone in the hospital or who is often alone. All of these examples show the kind of thought for others that should be habit-forming in the Child of God, and should set the Church apart. All of these belongs to the values we affirm as a church, that we are willing to be inconvenienced for the sake of the gospel.

Conclusion

If we want deep and lasting solutions to problems we face in the church, we are shown in this text that remaining oriented on Christ will bring those solutions, through three habits of the Child of God: knowing God, doing right, and doing love. These habits are not the ways that you can reach God. These habits are formed because God has reached you, and has lavished love upon you. This love is not of this world and this world cannot comprehend it, but it is love that saves the world, and you know that to be true, because that love has saved you. Amen.