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Righteousness

1 John 3:11–24

In 1 John 1:5, John writes, “And *this is the message that we have heard* from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and darkness is not in him, not at all.” Now, in 1 John 3:11, John uses nearly identical language: “For *this is the message that you have heard* from the beginning, that we should love one another.” In 1 John 1:5, John’s message describes the nature of God, but here in chapter 3, John’s message is proclaiming the commandment of God to love one another.

This isn’t the first time John has written about love in this letter. In 1 John 2:7–11, the apostle tells about God’s commandment to love one another. There, John describes the practical implications of love by using the imagery of walking in light versus walking in darkness—imagery he carries over from what he had written in 1 John 1:5–7.

By using in 1 John 2:7–11 the same language of light and darkness he had used 1 John 1:5–7, John is demonstrating that love in our lives is a reflection of God himself. God commands us to love so that we can begin to reflect one aspect of God’s nature. If God is light, and darkness is not in him, not at all (1 John 1:5), and if we have fellowship with one another by walking in the light as God is in the light (1 John 1:7), then our love for fellow believers functions as proof that we abide in God’s light (1 John 2:10). If we do not love other

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believers, then we betray the fact that we still walk in darkness (1 John 2:9) and that the darkness has blinded our eyes so that we cannot even see our lack of love for fellow believers (1 John 2:11).

So now, John is approaching the subject of love from a different angle, but he is again explaining the commandment to love one another by using language that describes God's nature. This time, instead of using imagery of light, John describes love with language of purification and righteousness.

As we explored in the last chapter, John explained that those of us who are God's children now will continually purify ourselves even as we recognize that what we will be has not yet appeared and that Jesus must appear before we can be fully transformed into being like him. Then, in chapter 3, verses 4–10, John gave the definition of purifying ourselves: practicing righteousness. Jesus came to take away sin (1 John 3:5) and to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8) so that we would no longer practice sin in an ongoing, unrepentant way but instead practice righteousness, as God is righteous. "Everyone practicing righteousness," John writes, "has been born of him" (1 John 2:29).

In 1 John 3:11, John extends his definition one step further: we purify ourselves and practice righteousness when we obey the message that we have heard from the beginning, "that we should love one another." Again, by obeying God's commandment to love, we reflect a critical aspect of God's nature. The righteousness of God is love. To practice righteousness is to love as God loves.

This link between righteousness and love shouldn't surprise us, since Jesus himself taught us that to love God and to love other people were the two greatest commandments, both of which summarize the entire Old Testament law (Matthew 22:34–40). Then, Paul wrote that "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10) and that "the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Galatians 5:14). Perfect righteousness—the

perfect keeping of the whole law—happens when we love one another.

John is circling back around to the subject of love because he wants us to understand love’s centrality within Christian discipleship. Love is not a nice additional piece we are free to embrace or reject. Rather, love is at the core of what it means to follow Jesus, because love is at the core of God’s own identity. As John continues to instruct us in the mystery of Christian love, he has three main lessons in this passage to explain the connection between love and righteousness: (1) why righteousness attracts persecution; (2) what love looks like in practical terms; and (3) how love gives us confidence before God.

John will return yet again to the subject of love later in his letter, but this passage is pivotal for understanding all John has to teach us about it.

WHY RIGHTEOUSNESS ATTRACTS PERSECUTION

John weaves back and forth between the linked concepts of love and righteousness in 1 John 3:11–15:

¹¹For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, ¹²not like Cain, *who* was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And for what cause did he murder him? Because his works were evil, but *those* works of his brother *were* righteous. ¹³Do not marvel, brothers, if the world hates you. ¹⁴We know that we have passed over from death into life, for we love the brothers. The one not loving abides in death. ¹⁵Everyone hating his brother is a murderer, and you know that every murderer does not have eternal life abiding in him.

The first lesson John has for us is that practicing righteousness (i.e., loving one another) will attract persecution. Certainly, God’s people knew about persecution before John wrote this letter. In fact, John points all the way back to the fourth chapter of Genesis, when Cain (the son of

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Adam and Eve) killed his brother Abel. Only one generation removed from perfection in the Garden of Eden and already a man is murdering his own brother!

Why did Cain murder Abel? John gives two reasons. First, Cain was “of the evil one.” This phrase in verse 12 (*ek tou ponerou*) is almost identical to the phrase from verse 10, “of God” (*ek tou theou*), which is an abbreviated version of the phrase used in verse 9, “born of God” (*ek tou theou gegennetai*). The imagery John is using here cuts a strict division between the only two spiritual families that exist in the world. Either you are born of God or you are born of the evil one.

So what does John mean when he says Cain was born of the evil one? Jesus himself opened up the significance of the phrase when he accused some of the Jews of being the offspring of the devil: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

If the devil’s two sins are to murder and to lie, then it is interesting to reread Genesis 4:8: “Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.” Cain’s murder in this passage is clear, but Jesus’ statement helps us to understand what Cain might have spoken to his brother: lies. Cain was deceiving his brother to lure him out away from their parents into the open field where he could murder Abel without anyone to witness his crime or to stop him. Cain was a liar and a murderer, just like his father the devil.

The second reason John gives as to why Cain would murder Abel is this: “Because his works were evil, but those works of his brother were righteous.” Going back to the story in Genesis 4, we learn that the Lord “had regard for” (i.e., looked favorably on) Abel’s sacrifice “of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions” (Genesis 4:4) but that the Lord had “no regard for” Cain’s offering “of the fruit of the ground.” We are not

told whether the problem with Cain's offering was what he sacrificed (plants vs. animals) or how he sacrificed (his heart before God), but it doesn't really matter. Either way, God confronted Cain about his poor sacrifice to encourage him and to warn him: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at your door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4:7).

Cain, however, did not listen to God. Instead of ruling over his sin, he embraced it and murdered his own brother. We do not know everything that was happening in Cain's heart from the original story in Genesis, but John's description here gives us clarifying insight. In 1 John 3, we get the sense that Abel's righteous works cast shame on Cain's evil works so that Cain felt provoked to murder his brother to remove Abel as a standard of comparison. Rather than repenting from his evil works and seeking to obey God as his brother Abel did, Cain instead opted to eliminate his competition.

Frighteningly, Cain was not unique to react to his brother Abel with an envious rage that led him to commit murder. John explains that Cain's behavior is the norm we should expect from all those born of the evil one, and not the exception: "Do not marvel, brothers, if the world hates you" (1 John 3:13). To this day, those whose works are evil hate those whose works are righteous. To put it bluntly, your righteous actions can provoke enough hatred for someone to persecute and even to murder you!

But even if we recognize that righteousness does attract persecution, that still doesn't explain why this would be the case. What is it about righteousness that provokes hatred from those whose works are evil?

John gives us an important clue to help us answer that question in verses 14 and 15: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, for we love the brothers. The one not loving abides in death. Everyone hating his brother is a murderer, and you know that every murderer does not have eternal life abiding in him." In these verses, John is teaching

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us two important principles for understanding our own lives as well as our relation to the world.

First, John completes the handoff between righteousness and love: righteousness looks like love. From here to the end of this section, John does not again mention the word *righteousness* but shifts directly into talking about love for fellow believers without missing a beat. The way John writes this whole passage makes it clear that righteousness and love are not two separate categories in his mind, but connected activities. To practice righteousness (the thing that John has been urging us to do since chapter 3, verse 4) means to love our fellow believers. To make sure that we don't gloss over this important link, we will describe love in the rest of this passage as "righteousness-love."

Second, John teaches us that righteousness-love is miraculous and supernatural. When we come to salvation through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we actually pass "over from death into life." In turn, this supernatural life then creates in us a love for other Christians. Apart from this life, we cannot love the brothers and we abide (remain/continue) in death. So, anyone who still hates another Christian does not have eternal life and continues in the footsteps of Cain and of the evil one.

By explaining the supernatural nature of love, John is planting an idea he will bring to fruition in verses 19 to 24, which is that love offers a kind of assurance of our salvation. In fact, John tells us, even persecution offers its own kind of assurance. Here's the gist of what John is saying: When we experience persecution because our works are righteous, that persecution is a sign God has radically transformed our nature to be like his. And, if we begin to resemble God by practicing righteousness-love like God's righteousness-love, then that resemblance is evidence of the fact that we have passed from death to life, having been given new birth to become like him as God's own children.

But as we start to evaluate the strength of this evidence in our lives, two questions arise: (1) What actually constitutes

true, genuine, supernatural righteousness-love? and (2) How much assurance can we really gain from righteousness-love in our lives? We'll look at both of those questions next.

WHAT RIGHTEOUSNESS-LOVE LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICAL TERMS

If, as John tells us, righteousness-love is an important proof to assure us that we have, in fact, passed over from death to life, then it becomes of the highest importance for us to evaluate our lives. Is this righteousness-love present in our lives, or not? What kind of love are we looking for?

There are so many different definitions of love in the world, so we need to be crystal clear about what we are talking about. John, in fact, is very specific in 1 John 3:16–18:

¹⁶In this we have come to know the love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷But whoever has the livelihood of the world and sees his brother having need and closes his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or in tongue but in work and in truth.

Many English translations smooth out an important word in verse 16. For example, the ESV says, “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 literally, verse 16 reads, “In this we know *the* love.” The word *the* doesn't make much sense in English, unless you change the verse up a little. The King James Version (KJV) adds the phrase “of God” to emphasize the distinction John is making: “Hereby perceive we the love of God.”

The KJV's paraphrase of the verse gets at the nuance of the word *the* in Greek, which is functioning as though it were the word *this*: “By this we know *this* love.” In other words, John is specifically limiting the word *love* to the kind of righteousness-love he has been talking about so far. Donald Burdick explains the word *the* here “serves to identify the

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specific love John has in mind—God’s active, sacrificial love manifested at the cross.”¹

The point is we are not allowed to choose for ourselves the definition of this love. Instead, John tells us exactly what *this* righteousness-love looks like: laying down our lives for fellow believers. If we want to practice this righteousness-love, then we must sacrifice our own comforts, possessions, conveniences, and even our own lives for the good of brothers and sisters in Christ.

But John purposefully does not allow us to keep this righteousness-love at arm’s length by thinking about it exclusively in terms of whether or not we would die for someone. Certainly, some of us may face the decision whether to die for someone else at some point in our lives, but John is more concerned about how we live on a day-to-day basis.

In very plain and practical terms, John simply asks whether we would give up our worldly goods to serve fellow believers when we see their needs. Do our hearts drive us in compassion to give as we are able, or not? And if we ultimately shut our hearts against our brothers and sisters in Christ, then how could we possibly claim to have God’s love in us?

John closes this section of the passage with a plea: “Little children, let us not love in word or in tongue but in work and in truth” (1 John 3:18). Please, let’s stop merely talking about love and actually live according to what we claim to believe. If we say we are followers of Jesus Christ, the one who voluntarily gave up all the riches of heaven so that we might inherit the kingdom, and who willingly died so that we might live, then we ought to live as he lived by sacrificially giving away the worldly goods we possess when we see fellow believers who need them.

If we do, then by this we know that this righteousness-love of God dwells in our hearts and that we have passed over from death to life.

HOW RIGHTEOUSNESS-LOVE OFFERS ASSURANCE

In 1 John 3:19–22, John wants us to know how this

righteousness-love offers us assurance of our salvation. He writes:

¹⁹And in this we will know that we are of the truth and will persuade our hearts before him, ²⁰for whenever our heart condemns *us*, God *is* greater than our hearts, and *he* knows all things. ²¹Beloved, if *our* heart does not condemn *us*, we have confidence before God, ²²and whatever we ask, we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and we do what *is* pleasing in his sight.

Verses 19 and 20 are notoriously difficult to interpret. One commentator charts out “at least ten different possible ways of understanding verses 19–20,” but John Stott helpfully explains that this passage’s “general sense is clear, but it is grammatically confused, and the variant readings betray the difficulty which even in the earliest days was found in interpreting them.”² These verses are actually fairly straightforward, even if we will have to work a bit to get at why John uses the grammar he does. Let’s break this passage down by answering the three most difficult exegetical questions.

First, when John writes, “And in this we will know that we are of the truth and will persuade our hearts before him,” the immediate question we should answer is whether “in this” refers backward to the previous context or forward to what John writes in verse 20 and following. Put another way, what is it that John points to as the evidence that provides us assurance in the face of our condemning hearts? Is it to the genuine love in work and in truth that we display (verses 16–18), or is it to something that John describes after verse 19?

The best answer is that John is looking backward since he doesn’t give anything that might be the “in this” after verse 19. In verse 20 and following, John only explains the process of gaining assurance, without pointing to anything that might provide evidence for our salvation “in this.” So, “in this” most likely refers to the way Christians do not close their hearts to fellow believers who have needs but instead love one another

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in work and in truth (verses 16–18). That kind of practical, sacrificial love in our lives functions as proof we can use to reassure our hearts before God.

Second, what does *persuade* mean? “Persuade” is the basic, literal translation of the word in verse 19, but most Bible translations don’t use it. Of the major Bible versions, only the Holman Christian Standard Bible translates the word as “convince,” which is a synonym of *persuade*. Otherwise, the major Bible translations uniformly translate this word as “assure” (KJV, New American Standard Bible), “reassure” (ESV, New Revised Standard Version), or even “set our hearts at rest” (New International Version).

This means the vast majority of Bible scholars who worked on this difficult passage recognize John had a specific kind of persuasion in mind: persuading our hearts toward reassurance when our hearts condemn us (verse 20). Despite the grammatical confusion, the general sense of what John has to say here clearly points toward how we go about finding reassurance before God.

Third, what does John mean in verse 20 when he says, “God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything”? Pointing to Paul’s statement “I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me” (1 Corinthians 4:4), some (like John Calvin) believe that this phrase refers to God’s strictness in judgment.³ These interpreters understand John to be saying that God knows even more to condemn in us than our own hearts do.

The problem with this interpretation is that the whole context, as we have seen, has to do with the exact opposite idea: how we reassure our hearts before God when our hearts condemn us. So, it’s better to understand this phrase as encouragement. Most likely, John is telling us to stop riding the endless roller coaster of our feelings and to stop basing our confidence on our own perceptions of spiritual growth. John wants to move us away from the perpetual navel-gazing introspection that only leads to despair by reminding us

that we simply don't have God's eternal perspective on the work he is doing in our lives. God is giving us eternal life and creating genuine love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, but that work doesn't all happen overnight.

C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) has a fantastic passage on our inability to judge our own spiritual progress in his book *Mere Christianity*:

Christian Miss Bates may have an unkindler tongue than unbelieving Dick Firkin. That, by itself, does not tell us whether Christianity works. The question is what Miss Bates's tongue would be like if she were not a Christian and what Dick's would be like if he became one. What you have a right to ask is whether that management, if allowed to take over, improves the concern....

We must, therefore, not be surprised if we find among the Christians some people who are still nasty. There is even, when you come to think it over, a reason why nasty people might be expected to turn to Christ in greater numbers than nice ones. That was what people objected to about Christ during His life on earth: He seemed to attract "such awful people."²⁴

The question isn't, Am I perfect? Instead, the question John is teaching us to ask is, Is God doing a miraculous work in me by giving me more genuine love for fellow believers than I used to have? Yes, we need to look for the evidence of righteousness-love in our lives, but we should not go overboard by being too harshly critical of our inevitable failures. God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything about where we began, where we are in our progress, and where he is taking us over the course of eternity.

At the end of the day, John wants us to rivet our attention on the kindness and love God demonstrates toward us. When we try to find eternal peace and security by looking at ourselves, we will waver in doubt as we find the failures that remain in our lives. But when we seek assurance for our salvation by taking our eyes off of ourselves and looking

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back at the character of God, who is greater than our own trembling hearts, our hearts can no longer condemn us and “we have confidence before God.”

For this reason, John Calvin’s perspective on this passage is extremely important, even though, as I mentioned earlier, I would quibble with his interpretation that the phrase “God is greater than our heart” refers to God’s strictness in judgment. Calvin writes this warning about the assurance “if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God” in verse 21:

Here, however, arises a greater difficulty, which seems to leave no confidence in the whole world; for who can be found whose heart reproves him in nothing? To this I answer, that the godly are thus reprov’d, that they may at the same time be absolv’d. For it is indeed necessary that they should be seriously troubled inwardly for their sins, that terror may lead them to humility and to a hatred of themselves; but they presently flee to the sacrifice of Christ, where they have sure peace.⁵

We must find our ultimate confidence in eternal life in the promises of Jesus and not in anything within ourselves. Only in the sacrifice of Jesus do we have real, sure, lasting peace before God, and only through the sacrifice of Jesus do we receive answers to our prayers. When John writes in verse 22 that “whatever we ask, we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what is pleasing in his sight,” he is not saying that our obedience obligates God. John Stott’s line is helpful here: “Obedience is the indispensable condition, not the meritorious cause, of answered prayer.”⁶

In fact, after John speaks of obedience in verse 22, he quickly clarifies that he is speaking of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ:

²³And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and *that* we love one

another, just as he gave us *the* commandment.²⁴ And the one keeping his commandments abides in him, and he in him, and in this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he gave to us. (1 John 3:23–24)

True confidence, genuine assurance, and this righteousness-love flow only from the eternal life God gives to those who believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ by his abiding Spirit. Recognizing spiritual fruit in our lives can be helpful, but we should not depend on that evidence more than we depend, by faith, on the finished work of Jesus Christ, because we are incapable of evaluating our own progress objectively.

Beloved, instead of incessant self-evaluation, let us believe the gospel and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you think it is accurate for John to link love and righteousness as he does in this chapter? How does it change the ways you think about righteousness and love if they are connected as John describes?
2. What worldly goods are you giving up right now for the sake of fellow believers?
3. Do you wrestle with assurance of your salvation? How should John's message in this section about persecution, persuading our hearts, and confidence change your perspective?

CHAPTER 6: RIGHTEOUSNESS (I JOHN 3:11–24)

1. Donald Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle: An In-Depth Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 267.
2. Ibid., 273; John Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 147.
3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of John*, in *Calvin Commentaries*, vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 222–23.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 210, 213.
5. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of John*, 224.
6. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 149.

CHAPTER 7: DISCERNMENT (I JOHN 4:1–6)

1. Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).
2. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Letter 101,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 7, trans. Charles G. Browne and James E. Swallow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 440.
3. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, vol. 14, trans. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905), 264.
4. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 295.
5. Ibid., 298.
6. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 157.

CHAPTER 8: LOVE (I JOHN 4:7–21)

1. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 495.
2. Additionally, John made emphatic use of the article *the*