

God's Children

God's grace is free, but it is extremely expensive. It claimed Christ's life to give it, and it demands ours as we receive it. We are God's children, and in his 1st Letter, chapter 3, the Apostle John challenges us to act like God's children. There is a seamless connection between our justification (God's "not guilty" verdict) and our sanctification (the way in which we live our lives for God). The former costs us nothing. The latter costs us everything. With regard to justification, we say, "We can't." With regard to sanctification, we say, "Yes, we can."

God on His own initiative transformed our identity from death row criminals into beloved children. He anointed us with the Holy Spirit in order to give us saving faith in Christ and also in order to change our attitudes and lives. In John's words, we are purifying ourselves. This does not mean that we will achieve moral perfection and total purity on this earth. John scolds such thinking in 1:8: "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves.*" Obviously our obedience to God's will, will always be less than perfect. What John means is that Jesus came to destroy sin - sin's guilt hanging over our heads and sin's power gripping our minds and hearts. He came to declare war on sin, which in every case is rebellious lawlessness against the holy will of God. Sin is evil. So people redeemed by Christ, who are now the brothers and sisters of Christ, hate sin too. They refuse to get comfortable with it, and they declare war on it too.

Still less will we let sin characterise our lives or let its ugly habits continue to dominate us. As we grow in our faith, we grow also in our determination to let go of behaviours that insult and infuriate God. An automatic corollary of "I love God" is "I hate sin." Proverbs 8:13 says, "*To fear the Lord is to hate evil.*" John is blunt: People who have stopped their struggle against sin are spiritually dead. They neither see nor know the true God. True believers may fall into sin, but they never surrender. True believers may fall into sin, but they repent, welcome Christ's forgiveness, and affirm their desire to change.

"*Let no one deceive you,*" says John. Antichrists working for the devil were seducing Christians into abandoning their struggle against sin as pointless. You must admit that there is a certain diabolical logic to that view - if we have forgiveness in Christ, if our bodies are going to die anyway and our true destiny is to live in heaven, what does it matter if we indulge ourselves now? Why struggle so hard for chastity, sobriety, and gentleness when adultery, heavy drinking, and violence are so much fun?

They only seem like fun. Actually, they are part of Satan's terrible rebellion against the Lord of the universe. Satan is not the jolly king of hell, as cartoons and bad jokes often portray. He is the twisted, sick, evil mind behind all sin, and his fate has already been announced - he will soon be plunging head first into the lake of burning sulphur. Whoever is driven by his evil will share his fate. Who would want that? As Paul wrote, "*We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?*" (Rom. 6:2). We have been born of God, says John. God literally became our Father (His "seed remains" in us, verse 9). That seed comes to us in Word and sacrament with our "new DNA," bringing a new life pattern that finds its joy in doing God's will.

These issues are still urgent today. "Christian" young people move in with each other outside of wedlock and write off family and church concerns as antiquated traditionalism. Churches with weak programs of spiritual care allow unmarried couples living together to linger unrebuked in the official fellowship. Congregations put their best human resources into other projects and let the recruiting and training of elders languish. Becoming a church member is made easy - just a few Bible classes and a confirmation ceremony - and then there are no further expectations for spiritual growth. People bristle at any attempt to steer them away from sinful behaviour by misquoting some famous Bible passages: "*Let him that is without sin cast the first stone*" and "*Judge not, lest you be judged.*"

In order to live out what John is telling us, it will be necessary for us to learn how to take correction from others. A prideful spirit listens to nobody. When we are caught in a sin, God wants to use other Christians to bring us back, but that can't happen if we are too full of ourselves to listen and repent. Proverbs 15:32 says, "*He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.*"

Proverbs 17:10 adds, "*A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool.*"

If someone you know is caught up in a habitual sin, will you speak up to restore the person? And will you let other people give you that word of correction when you are sinning?

Conversely, when you hear fearful words from a despairing Christian, will you help that person see the good things he or she has done that are living proof of living faith? And will you allow yourself to find joy and comfort in letting other people commend you for the ways in which you have let your faith work in your life? Living as children of God helps us *know* that the Spirit lives in us.