BORN OF GOD

1 John 2:28–3:10

Key Verse: 3:9

“No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.”

In our study of 1 John we’ve been learning about Christian fellowship. It starts when we personally have fellowship with God the Father through his Son Jesus Christ, and then join others who also do so. It’s a fellowship that proclaims Jesus. It’s a fellowship in God’s light; we honestly confess our sins and come to Jesus for his forgiveness and cleansing, and we encourage each other to live in his light. It’s a fellowship where we each strive to obey his commands and learn to live as Jesus did. It’s a fellowship of love, where we harbor no hatred toward any brother or sister. It’s a fellowship where everyone, young and old, has received forgiveness, knows God, and overcomes the evil one. It’s a fellowship that doesn’t love the world, that acknowledges that Jesus is the Christ and that lives against the pressures of the world to deny him. It’s a fellowship where we each have an anointing of the Holy Spirit and struggle to remain in Jesus.

In today’s passage we learn that Christian fellowship is a gathering of people who’ve been born of God. Being his children or being born of him is repeated in this passage nine times. According to John, one of the most important outcomes of being born of God is that we don’t “continue to sin.” In this study we especially want to learn what that means, and how we can experience God’s help in our struggle against our sins. May God speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at 2:28. Here John again calls believers “dear children.” And he repeats his exhortation from the last passage to “continue” or “remain” in Jesus. We learned last week what it means to “remain in Jesus.” 2:24 reads, “See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.” What we “have heard from the beginning” is mainly how Jesus loved. Jesus loved first; he loved us when we were spiritually sick and unable to love him back. To remain in him means to keep remembering his amazing love for me every day. Awareness of his great love is our lifeline in our connection with both God the Father and Jesus the Son. When we forget his great love, we become nearsighted and spiritually blind (2Pe1:9). But when we always remember his great love, we can be confident and unashamed before him when he comes again (28b). We can’t be confident and unashamed before him based on our performance, but we can be confident and unashamed before him when we remember his great love for us.

Look at verse 29. Here John emphasizes the righteousness of Jesus. He said back in verse 1, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.” And now he mentions again about knowing that Jesus is righteous. But this time, he mentions it not because Jesus is qualified to pray for us, or because he’s the atoning sacrifice for our sins (2), but to help us discern who is born of God and who is not. John says, “If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.” Let’s read verse 29 together. John is again correcting the bad influence of the Gnostics. They claimed to be born of God and to know God. But despite this, they were not doing what was right, and they weren’t even struggling to do so. John wanted believers to have discernment about such people. Why? It’s connected to verse 28. When we have discernment to see people who are doing what is right or not, it’s one way we can continue in Jesus.

Then, as John thinks for a moment about being born of God, he breaks out into an exclamation. Look at 3:1a. “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” Let’s read those words together. When he thought about being God’s child, John was so moved that he could not *but* praise God. He’d just said that only those who do what is right are born of God. But clearly, being born of God doesn’t happen because *we* do what is right—it happens only because of the great love of God the Father. The rest of the Bible also testifies to this. Romans 5:6–8 reads, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” And Ephesians 2:1–5 reads, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” Jesus described the Father’s love in making us his children in his parable of the prodigal son. The son had squandered his father’s wealth in wild living and had become like a miserable slave. But when he humbled himself and returned to his father, the father saw him when he was a long way off, was filled with compassion for him, ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. He then told his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Lk15:11–24). Despite all our sins and failures, that’s how our Father God sees us when we come to him through faith in Jesus.

Look at verse 1b. There seems to be a great contrast between who we are before God, and how the world sees us. The world, John says, doesn’t “know” us. It’s not because we haven’t met yet, or because we’re hiding in the world “incognito;” it’s because they did not know “him,” meaning Jesus. This not “knowing” us is a nice way of saying the world doesn’t treat us very well, even though we are God’s dearly beloved children. They treated God’s own Son Jesus the same way (Jn16:1–3). When people treat us badly, it’s hard to feel like dearly loved children of God. But especially when we’re despised or mistreated, we need to be thinking of the great love of our heavenly Father.

Let’s read verse 2. Here John goes on to develop not only who we are now, but “what we will be.” It means we need to not be engrossed in the past or the present but turn our eyes to the future. It’s the second time he mentions the Second Coming of Jesus (2:28; 3:2). He says, “…when he appears.” Colossians 3:4 also says, “When Christ, who is your life, appears, you also will appear with him in glory.” As those born of God, we need to be thinking of our future hope, our hope to see Jesus, John says, “as he is.” This is a key idea. We won’t see Jesus as he was when he came the first time. At that time, he came as a humble carpenter, a man of sorrows and a suffering servant. But when he appears, we will see him “as he is.” We will see him in the glory he now shares with the Father. We will see him as the Son of God in glorious splendor. And as we see him “as he is,” something amazing is going to happen to us. It’s what John meant when he said, “what we will be has not yet been made known.” John says that the mere sight of Christ in glory will be enough to make us “like him,” glorious and pure like him (1Co13:12; 2Co3:18).

But this hope is not meant for us to take it easy now. Let’s read verse 3. Here John again comes back to the bad influence of the Gnostics. They thought their secret knowledge was sufficient and that they didn’t have to struggle to be pure. They thought it didn’t matter what they did with their bodies. But according to Apostle John, it matters very much what we do with our bodies. As we read this verse, we may feel conflicted, because no matter how hard we try, we can’t really purify ourselves. In fact, it’s impossible with our own willpower or strength. But there is a way we can purify ourselves. John wrote back in 1:7, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” We purify ourselves by continuing to come into God’s light, letting it expose any sin or darkness in us, and putting our faith in the blood of Jesus to purify us from all sin. John wrote in 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” We purify ourselves by confessing our sins and depending on Jesus to forgive us and purify us from all unrighteousness. Honestly, it’s a very humbling thing to do. But it’s the only real way to be purified. As those born of God, we shouldn’t give up the battle for inner purity, but keep coming to Jesus honestly and humbly and putting our faith not in ourselves but in his blood. Why should we struggle to purify ourselves in this way? It’s not to gain people’s recognition. John says it’s because of our hope to see Jesus someday, to stand before him confident and unashamed when he comes.

Read 3:4–6. Here John’s main point is again against the Gnostics. They taught that it’s okay to continue to sin, as long as you have the right knowledge. They were even claiming to live in God in this way. But John says very clearly that people who continue to sin have neither seen nor known God.

But this seems a bit confusing. Is John saying that all Christians are those who’ve completely stopped sinning? No. He wrote in 1:8, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” And as we’ve seen, he wrote in 2:1, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense…” So clearly John knew that those born of God still have the potential to sin. Here we need to think about the meaning of the expression “continue to sin.” It means to keep on in sin in a willful habit. It means to have no intention of struggling against our sin. We may not succeed very often in resisting our sin, but because we’ve been born of God, we’re still struggling against it.

Read verses 7–8. Here John uses even stronger language to refute the Gnostics. They were trying to lead sincere believers astray, not to take sin seriously and to live as they did. But John repeats that those born of God pursue righteous living, just as Jesus is righteous. And he says that those who do what is sinful are “of the devil.” It means the devil has a hold on them; they’ve been deceived and come under his influence. Some people take any notion of “the devil” as hyper-spiritual and fanatical. But according to John, we need to be aware that the devil is real, and that he’s still working to get people to do what is sinful along with him. The devil is very subtle. But John tells us that in Jesus there is no sin, that he came to take away our sins, and that he came to destroy the devil’s work (5,8b). Those born of God need to be clear about sin and about the devil’s temptations.

Let’s read our key verse, verse 9. In this verse John uses a rather shocking metaphor of “God’s seed.” When we are born of God, God’s seed remains in us. What does it mean? This “seed” seems to be the anointing of the Holy Spirit (3:24). In fact, we are born of God, according to John 3:5–8, through the work of the Spirit. Since the Spirit remains in us, he’s the one who empowers us and influences us and leads us to resist our sinful nature and the temptations around us. So John’s expression “they cannot go on sinning” means that we can’t be comfortable to freely sin. If God’s Spirit is in us, he will convict us of our guilt. In fact, he’ll give us new desires, holy desires, to do something else besides sinning, to actually love God and love others. Sanctification is a gradual process, but there is an element of certainty and victory in it because it doesn’t come from us but from God’s Spirit living in us. Verse 9 is meant to give us both discernment and comfort. May God renew our faith and our struggle against our own sin.

Finally, let’s read verse 10. Again, John wants us to test people’s claim to be God’s children. It’s the same as Jesus’ teaching: “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Mt7:16,20). Those born of God do what is right, and they love their brothers and sisters.

Today we thought about what it means to be born of God. It enables us to experience the great love of God. It gives us a hope to see Jesus. And it inspires us to pursue purity and righteous living. May God renew his love and his hope in our hearts, and help us to glorify him in the way we live.