

I suppose that some of you have probably wrestled with John a bit.

Because John is quite insistent that sin has no place in the Christian life.

Sin is utterly inconsistent with the Christian life.

Or, to use John’s exact words,

“No one born of God makes a practice of sinning,
for God’s seed abides in him,
and he cannot sin because he has been born of God.” (3:9)

While this sounds impossible,

you have to think about the alternative.

The alternative would be to say that sin is okay.

Sin is perfectly consistent with the Christian life!

And those who are born of God sin regularly!

But if that is the case,

if sin is “okay”

then why did Jesus come?

John Calvin said it well:

“inasmuch as Christ’s kingdom flourishes in them, sin is abolished.”
(quoted in Yarbrough, 183)

Or as our Confession puts it,

“They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated,
having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them,
are further sanctified, really and personally,
through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection,
by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them:
the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed,
and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified;
and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces,
to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”

In sanctification there is both a definitive aspect:

“the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed”

and a progressive aspect:

“the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified...”
with the result of

“the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”

But this is likely to create a certain amount of difficulty in John’s hearers,

because as we look at ourselves, we often see how far short we fall.

John deals with this by a series of statements using the phrase “by this.”

This is one of John’s favorite ways of saying things.

He uses the phrase “by this” 14 times in his epistle,

4 times in 3 verses in 2:3-5

9 times in 32 verses from 3:10-4:17

and finally in 5:2

In our passage today it is used in 3:16, 19, 24 and 4:2.

Introduction: By This We Know Love (3:16-18)

¹⁶By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

John sets up our passage tonight with the “by this” of verse 16.

By this we know love.

If you want to know what love looks like – look at Jesus.

By this we know love –

that he laid down his life for us.

And what is more, this love that Jesus had for us should be the model for us:

and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

Laying down your life for one another is not optional.

This is what love is!

If you have stuff and status –

how do you use it to love and serve your fellow believers?

This starts with the “one another” around you in this congregation.

But it also includes our brothers around us in the community –

and our brothers throughout the world.

Remember that Paul urges the Macedonian and Achaean Christians to remember their brothers in Judea.

Even so, we should remember our brethren around the world

and seek to help our brothers in need.

So far we have largely been talking about how to do it.

Now we need to move beyond talk to “deed and truth.”

1. By This We Know that We Are of the Truth: Assurance and Abiding (3:19-24)

¹⁹By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; ²⁰for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

And this is where verse 19 connects to verse 18:

“by this we shall know that we are *of the truth*.”

What truth?

This is no abstract theological dogma –

nor is it even the Christological statement “I am the way the truth and the life.”

Rather, this is the *truth* that was referred to in verse 18.

How do you know that you are of the truth?

“By this.”

By what?

By loving the brethren in deed and in truth.

You know that you are of the truth (you know that you are born of God)

when you resemble the truth – because you do the truth!

[do you see again that threefold pattern:

you know, you abide, you do –

faith, love, obedience – these three are woven together over and over again!]

And remember, that we are not talking about some abstract ethics, either!

The truth that you are doing is the truth as it is in Jesus.

The truth that you are resembling is Christ’s own self-emptying love!

As Yarbrough puts it,

“To love, then, in both word and deed is to know more clearly that the source of one’s identity and life as a believer is the truth – which is to say, in John’s frame of reference, Christ.” (209)

But sometimes our hearts condemn us.

Sometimes we look at our imperfect love and half-hearted obedience, and John says that whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

The God who knows all things – who sees all things – who judges all things – is also the God who sent Jesus as the propitiation for our sins (2:2).

And Jesus Christ is the advocate with the Father who intercedes for us (2:1).

Therefore, the fact that God knows all things is a reason for confidence!

And with this confidence, John addresses his hearers in v21:

²¹*Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;* ²²*and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.*

What is this confidence for?

This confidence enables us to come into the presence of God
and bring our petitions before him.

And John goes so far as to say
“whatever we ask we receive from him.”

This, after all, is what Jesus told John:

“I will do whatever you ask in my name,
so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.
If you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it (John 14:13-14).”

Why do you not have?

As James puts it, Because you do not ask.

“But Pastor, I ask!”

Ah, but you ask and you do not receive because you ask for your own selfish pleasures!

Or, as John says here,

*whatever we ask we receive from him,
because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.*

The one who resembles Jesus in laying down his life for his brothers
will receive whatever he asks.

Why?

Because the Father listens to his Son and does what he asks.
Therefore, the one who imitates the Son will also imitate the Son
in asking for that which pleases God as well!

So here in this passage, John has focused on what it means to *do*.

But as usual, John will not remain focused on one part of his triad by itself!

Because what does it mean to “keep his commandments”?

²³*And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.*

What does obedience look like?

Believe in Jesus and love one another.

Faith, obedience and love – knowing, doing, and abiding –
are inseparably linked together in Christ.

John rarely uses the name of Jesus in his epistle,
but that only serves to highlight it when it does appear.

And

²⁴ *Whoever keeps his commandments* [in other words, whoever believes in Jesus and loves one another] *abides in God, and God in him.*

John then wraps up this paragraph with another “by this”:

And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

But this raises another question.

If we know that he abides in us by the Spirit whom he has given us,
how do we know the Spirit of God?

2. By This You Know the Spirit of God: Testing the Spirits (4:1-3)

¹*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.* ²*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,* ³*and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.*

What does it mean to “test” spirits?

John is talking about how to evaluate preaching.

There are all sorts of teachers out there.

And every teacher has some sort of spirit.

What sort of spirit does he have?

Well, every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh
is from God.

And every spirit that does not confess Jesus
is not from God!

It’s that simple!

The fundamental Christian confession is that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

If you deny the incarnation of Christ,
then you cannot be from God.

John is not giving a full-fledged statement of Christological orthodoxy here,
but he is saying that what you confess about Jesus
is at the very heart of whether you are from God or not!

In John’s day, the Docetist view was on the rise.

Docetism got its name from the word “dokew” – to seem.

They taught that Jesus only *seemed* to come in the flesh.

John says of such a view:

This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

John has already spoken of how many antichrists have come.
It appears that John thinks of a ‘final’ antichrist at the end of history –
but the spirit of antichrist is present all throughout history.

And at the heart of the spirit of antichrist
is the fundamental denial that Jesus Christ has come from God.

But many heresies have arisen since John’s day!
Arius believed that Jesus came from God.
Joseph Smith believed that Jesus came in the flesh – even to North America!
Muhammad confessed that Jesus came in the flesh!

Why don’t we listen to them?

It appears as though John recognized this potential problem –
because he addresses it in verses 4-6:

3. By This We Know the Spirit of Truth: Listening to the Apostles (4:4-6)

⁴Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Pay attention to the pronouns in verses 1-6:

You are the little children – those whom John is addressing.
They are the antichrists – the false teachers who have gone out from you (2:19)
We are the apostles – John and his fellow servants who preach the message.

John had been using an inclusive “we” in chapter 3,
with occasional uses of “you” to draw you into his message.

But in chapter 4:1-4 he focuses on “you.”

In the Greek, where the first person plural verbs have been dominating the text,
the array of second-person plural verbs now jumps out at you,

“*You* are from God and *you* have overcome them,
for he who is in *you* is greater than he who is in the world.”

John once again describes all of reality in terms of two polar opposites:
There is the world – and there is “us.”

If you are from the world, you will listen to “them.”
If you are of God, you will listen to “us.”

And by this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

If you listen to “us” – if you listen to the apostolic teaching –
then you know the Spirit of truth.

If you listen to “them” – if you do not listen to the apostolic teaching –
then you know the spirit of antichrist.

But the world is implacably opposed to Jesus.

Jesus himself had said this:

*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.
If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own;
but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world,
therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18-19)*

There is a reason why the world hates you.

It is because they hate Jesus!

We live in a world that wants to say “It’s more complicated!”

After all, there are hundreds of Christian denominations –
and all sorts of varieties of world religions!

And if you think that this is anything new,

just read *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*,

a 14th century account of a “world traveler” who describes all sorts of religions –
including descriptions of several different Christian denominations!

Mandeville was not very impressed with the Papal position

that said that salvation depended on your submission to the Pope.

[this was taking “listening to us” to one extreme:

demanding that all Christians be part of the same organization]

But Mandeville tends to downplay the importance of Christ.

Mandeville seems to suggest that a good moral life is all that matters –
what you believe about Jesus isn’t all that important.

John would suggest that the key is whether people “listen to us.”

But who are the “us”?

Since John is contrasting the “spirit” that does not confess Jesus

with the Spirit that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh,

I would suggest that the “us” refers to those (like John)

who preach the true gospel.

While he does not explicitly identify the “us” as restricted to the apostles,

it would certainly be limited to “the apostolic teaching.”
Think back to his opening “we”:
“which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes,
which we looked upon and have touched with our hands,
concerning the word of life.” (1:1)

This is an eyewitness “us” –
an authoritative “us” which could simply be John himself!

Certainly, one implication of 4:6 is that if you do not accept what John is writing
then you are not from God.

There is a certain peremptory tone to
“We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us.”

How can John say this?

As Jesus said in John 15:20

*If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.
If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.*

Jesus said that those who belong to Jesus will listen to Jesus’ servants.

But John’s confidence here is rooted in the triumph of Jesus over the devil and his works.
3:8 – “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil”

Jesus had said this to his disciples:

“In this world you will have trouble, but take heart!
I have overcome the world!” (John 16:33)

It may have seemed ironic at first:

Jesus was going to his death!

Just hours later, Jesus was crucified!

But this is *how* Jesus destroyed the works of the devil.

This is how Jesus conquered the world.

The word translated “overcome” is the word “nikaw” –
which means “to conquer.”

Jesus is revealed as the one who conquers sin and death
through his own death on the cross.

And because you abide in him, therefore *you* have overcome the world!

*⁴Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is
greater than he who is in the world.*

You have overcome these false prophets.

You have conquered the antichrists.

Because you abide in Christ.

They are from the world and the world listens to them.

“They” change from age to age.

In John’s day it was the Docetists – the early Gnostics.

Later it would be the Manichees, the Muslims, the Mormons, the Moonies –

those who refuse to listen to the apostolic message.

He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world

The Divine Warrior – the one who conquered sin and death –

the one who has triumphed over the works of the devil –

this is the one who now abides in you!

And therefore you may have confidence before God –

and also before the world,

because the one who is in you is greater than the world!