

Lesson 14: What Are You Practicing?”

1 John 3:9-10

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1 John 3:9-10 *No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.*

“PRACTICE”

It is said: “practice makes perfect.” Now I’m confident that most of us never truly achieve perfection in any endeavor, so perhaps we can more accurately say that “practice makes *better*.” So what are you practicing?

Whatever you are practicing you’re sure to get better at it – whether it be cooking, gaming, woodworking, music, parenting, exercising or driving – whatever. Practice - which means repetitively engaging in and devoting oneself to, with consistency and deliberation – is sure to yield positive results over time. It is a well-proven truth that practice over time is sure to improve performance. So I ask again – what are you practicing – spiritually?

In 1 John 3, verse 7-10, the same Greek word and thought occur in each verse. In the New American Standard Bible, from which I prefer to study, the word is translated all four times as “practice” or “practices.” “Practice” occurs also in the New King James, New English Version and Phillips translations. Other versions such as New International and King James simply use “do” or “does”, which seems to me not to convey the Greek meaning of consistency nearly as well.

Do you see the four occasions? In verse 7, “the one who *practices* righteousness is righteous ...” In verse 8, “the one who *practices* sin is of the devil ...” In verse 9, “No one who is born of God *practices* sin ...” And in verse 10, “anyone who does not *practice* righteousness is not of God.” It seems to me that John is making the strong case that there are two opposing and opposite spiritual *practices*: practicing sin or practicing righteousness. And to continue our earlier thought, practicing of either will make better, or improve the performance of either.

THE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

When one sincerely invites Jesus Christ into his/her life to be Savior and Lord, these three supernatural things happen instantaneously:

1. A NEW STANDING = Justification = a NEW RELATIONSHIP with God
2. A NEW CALLING = Sanctification = a NEW PURPOSE for living
3. A NEW NATURE = Regeneration = a NEW PERSONALITY

Though all three happen at once, all three also commence a development that grows and matures over time. (1) Our relationship with God grows as we spend time (abide) with Him. (2) As we understand that our new purpose for living is to glorify God in everything, the indwelling Holy Spirit helps us carry out that purpose in thought, word and deed, transforming us day by day. (3) Our new regenerated personality begins to reject wrong choices and embrace correct ones. The result – we sin less and please God more.

This third aspect of our new life in Christ is what John speaks of when he talks of “practicing” righteousness and not “practicing” sin. Even though we have taken on a new nature through being born into God’s family, we still hold on to the old nature. Warren Wiersbe, in our companion study book on 1 John, tells how a Native American explains the conflict of these two natures. He says “I have two dogs living in me – a mean dog and a good dog. They are always fighting. The mean dog wants me to do bad things, and the good dog wants me to do good things. Do you know which dog wins? The one I feed the most!”

In the words of today’s passage, the nature that wins is the one I *practice* utilizing the most.

PAUL’S TEACHING ON THE WAR OF OUR NATURES

Romans 6:6-14 *Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.*

Even so, consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts. And do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Paul and John are in complete agreement. We must choose to consider ourselves dead to sin, and consider ourselves alive to God, not letting sin be master over us. We must practice righteousness, choosing by the power of the Holy Spirit within us, not to practice sin. We must feed the new nature, not the old. As we do this conscientiously, consistently and repetitively, we will see the results of an emerging new godly personality and nature. And we will be able to confidently see and say that we are His!

THE GRAFTED AVOCADO TREE ANALOGY

J. Vernon McGee makes an excellent analogy to illustrate this same point. As well as being a renowned Bible commentator, he was also a bit of a horticultural expert. He had older avocado trees with strong root systems that were no longer producing good fruit. So onto these trees he would graft branches of younger, vibrant avocado trees. The result? – the grafted branches would produce excellent fruit, feeding off the root system of the established tree. But every now and then the older tree would send out new branches below the graft that produced poor fruit, and he would have to cut them off so as not to sap the tree's energy from the new grafts. Below the graft – poor fruit. Above the graft – excellent fruit.

And, says McGee, so it is with our old and new natures. Our old nature, if allowed to yield fruit, will produce thoughts and actions of sin. It is our “lower” nature, which we must consider as dead. But the new regenerated nature, if the old nature is kept in check, will produce excellent fruit of righteousness, for it is the “upper”, newer nature made alive by God grafting us into His life. And it will surely yield fruit pleasing to Himself. So keep your old, lower nature well pruned. And allow the new nature to flourish!

1 JOHN 3:9

So with this helpful background information, we should be able to correctly and simply navigate our verses of the day.

First, John writes *“No one who is born of God ...”* Now “born of God” refers to a Christian believer, and specifically of the new birth or regeneration that occurs at salvation, bringing a new nature. (This is the third of the things we mentioned previously that occur at salvation.)

John goes on to say that *“no one who is born of God practices sin.”* We now know that he is saying that a Christian will not commit sin with consistency and deliberation. It will not be his norm or pattern of life. Like the prodigal son, he will not and can not stay in the pigsty for long, but will ultimately return to his Father in repentance and renewal to practice righteousness. In theological terms, this is teaching what is called the “perseverance of the saints,” meaning the truly redeemed of the Lord will indeed overcome. As Jesus said simply: “my sheep follow me.”

Then John says, *“because His seed abides in Him.”* This seed is the very life of God – the eternal life that is God's gift to His children. This is the seed that cannot die, but will always bring forth life and His righteousness. It is this seed of God's life in us that will keep the born of God from practicing sin. And John concludes the verse by restating that the one born again cannot sin – meaning in this way of consistency and deliberation. The point is, from the end of verse 8, that Jesus died and rose that you might not sin and be bound by sin, and would be given the power to *practice* righteous behavior.

1 JOHN 3:10

“By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious ...” This verse’s opening phrase lets us know two things: (1) All the people of the world can be divided into two families, and (2) John is going to tell us how to distinguish the members of these two families.

There is one family that is the children of God. These belong exclusively to God and not to the devil. They are members of God’s family because He has adopted them in. And they are protected and defended and strengthened and taught by Father God.

And there is a second family that is the children of the devil. Remember, Jesus said to the religious leaders of His day: “You are of your father, the devil.” (John 8:44) These belong exclusively to the devil and not to God. They are members of the devil’s family because they have refused to answer God’s call to join His family. And they are protected and defended and strengthened and taught by the devil. They probably don’t know they are in this family, but they are indeed by their own choosing.

Don’t you see from this that the commonly held teaching of the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man is a damnable heresy. We are not one big “happy” family, but two divided families. They are not our enemies, but neither are they our brothers. We love them as Christ loved them, but we cannot condone their unbelief nor their unrighteous deeds. We long for them to join our family, and we lovingly urge them to do so, but we cannot bring them in, we can only point them to the One who can.

So then John gives us two specific ways that children of God and children of the devil are obviously distinguished. Noticed these have nothing to do with going to church or with claiming to be of one or the other family. Notice also that these are not doctrinal tests (which John will give us later in his letter) but are “fruit inspection” tests – tests of observable behavior over time.

1. PRACTICING RIGHTEOUSNESS And we now know this is consistently and deliberately choosing to do those things that please God – doing the “right thing.” It is not just “being good” or “doing good things”, but it is a moment-by-moment choice to do God’s will as best as we can know it. It is selflessness rather than selfishness.

2. LOVING GOD’S CHILDREN (“his brother”) Do Christ-followers love their brothers and sisters in the faith? Absolutely. It is an “obvious” sign of their being in the family of God. Like with human families, there might occasionally be “sibling rivalry” or “in-fighting” squabbles, which God condemns. But the “practice” of Christians will always be to love their spiritual siblings.

Do those not in God’s family love the children of God, acknowledging them as such? No. They are blind to the fact that there is even a family of God outside of themselves. And because they are children of the devil, usually without even knowing it, they resent and oppose the children of God and their godly ways. Notice John’s word (in the NASV) “obvious.” These two observable behaviors should be “obvious.”

So I return to, “What are you practicing?” If you are indeed a child of God, born again by His Spirit and alive to His calling, then you had better be *practicing* righteousness. Last week we spoke of “The Pursuit of Purity.” That is a pursuit of keeping out the contamination of sin in our life. This pursuit of righteousness is closely related, but has more to do with choosing the right at every turn. It is more about chosen behavior and seeking God’s inner strength to walk in truth, integrity and morality.

“I believe in the security of the believers, but I also believe in the insecurity of make-believers!” J. Vernon McGee

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”
Jesus, in Matthew 5:6

Say it with me: “May righteousness be my chosen path, that I may have confidence that I am in the family of God!”