

Introduction:

One of the deepest human longings is the longing to belong. We have a need to be needed, a desire for to be desired. We want to be part of a group where we feel accepted, where we fit in.

We're looking for a never-ending corner bar like *Cheers* that won't ever close or go off the air – that "one place in the world where everybody knows your name, and they always glad you came."

Marriage and family may give us a hint of it, but they too often fall short of the ideal. Our friends give us another hint. There are good friends, but none of them are perfect. They don't fully satisfy the depth of the longing we have to belong.

We might look to the church for the affirmation we need – and this is certainly close to the mark. But in reality, as in other areas, our ability to belong in any given church depends largely on us.

John asks us to look higher than the people around us to the God who made us. In Christ, we are all His children. It's a family in which we truly and finally belong – and it only gets better from here. Finding a place in the family of God, John wants us to feel a lot like the unicorn at the end of the *Last Battle* in C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* series:

"I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now."

When we find our place in the family of God, we find the place where we fully and finally belong.

Outline

- I. What it means to be children of God 3:1-3
- II. What God expects of His children 3:4-10

I. What it means to be children of God 3:1-3

3:1 John is expressing astonishment.

Warren Wiersbe restates it as, *“Behold, what peculiar, out-of-this-world kind of love the Father has bestowed on us.”*

The disciples used a similar word when they were astonished at Jesus calming the storm.

Matthew 8:27 *So the men marveled, saying, “Who can this be, [literally, “What manner of man is this?”] that even the winds and the sea obey Him?”*

They had never encountered anyone quite like Christ before. Nowhere else do we encounter anything quite like the Father’s love.

Some manuscripts add the phrase “and so we are,” in the midst of v.1. Having come to Christ we have genuinely found a place in God’s family. This sounds a lot like the Prologue in John’s Gospel:

John 1:12-13 ¹²*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become **children of God**, to those who believe in His name: ¹³*who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.**

On our side we have to receive Jesus, that is, believe in His name. We have to totally trust in Him to save us from sin and death. On the other side God imparts new life through a new birth. We exercise faith; God gives eternal life.

3:2 *The children of God, who enter His family through faith in His Son, display their Father's likeness, because of their conformity to Him who is the perfect image of the invisible God. They display it in measure here and now; they will display it fully on a coming day.” – F.F. Bruce*

3:3 John intentionally uses the present tense, *purifies*, which indicates a continuous process which John sees as taking place at this moment. In other words, as the Lutheran scholar R.C.H. Lenski puts it, *“He who stops purifying himself has dropped this hope from his heart.”*

That same present tense also keeps us from thinking in terms of perfectionism, saying that while still in this world we can reach a point when we no longer need to grow in holiness.

Notice how vital a part the expectation of Christ’s return plays in John’s point. Each and every one of us needs to maintain a deep and growing expectation of Christ’s appearing.

See also **2:28** above

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What God expects of His children 3:4-10

3:4 For us to understand what God expects of His children – of us – one of the first things we have to do is begin to see sin as God sees it. John calls it “lawlessness.” In other words, sin is rebellion against God. It is a generally lawless attitude towards God.

“An unbeliever who sins is a creature sinning against his Creator. A Christian who sins is a child sinning against his Father. The unbeliever sins against law; the believer sins against love.” – Wiersbe

3:5 John has been pointing us to Christ’s future coming. Now he turns to His past coming. John sees two purposes for that coming:

1. to take away our sins (v.5)
2. to destroy the works of the devil (v.8)

3:6 A few other translations might give us a better idea of what John is saying:

1 John 3:6 (ESV) *No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.*

1 John 3:6(NLT) *Anyone who continues to live in him will not sin. But anyone who keeps on sinning does not know him or understand who he is.*

Pastor Chuck Smith explains,

“It is not that we don’t sin at all. It is just that the pattern of our lives is to grow away from the old sinful habits; and though we still make mistakes and may fall on occasion, our lives have changed. There is an observable pattern of repentance.”

Each of us may have key moments of change to look back to. Maybe we prayed to receive Christ in a Sunday School class, or responded at an evangelistic meeting, and these can all be tremendously used by God. But John doesn’t ask us about those. What he wants to know is “Do you keep on sinning?”

David Jackman asks the question, *“If Jesus was sinless and came to this world expressly to take away our sins, how can sin be cherished by anyone who is really living in Christ?”*

He continues, *“Although Christians fail and fall, Christians can be forgiven. But we are to remember that such forgiveness is at the expense of the life-blood of the Son of God. Grace is free, but it is not cheap. The mark of true gratitude is that we do not keep on sinning.”*

3:7 Compare this verse with **2:29**.

There is an opportunity for deception here because many claim to be children of God, even as we are, but live in such a way as to deny that assertion. John wants us to know we don’t have to believe them.

3:8 Two purposes for Christ's coming: **3:5** and **3:8**.

Righteousness is in perfect harmony with the nature of Christ. Sin is in perfect harmony with the nature of the devil, who has been sinning, rebelling against God, right from the beginning.

F.F. Bruce clarifies John's point,

"Here the antithesis is between the family of God and the family of the devil; in either family the children may be known by their moral likeness to the head of the family."

Matthew 7:15-21 ¹⁵*"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? ¹⁷Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Therefore by their fruits you will know them.*

²¹*"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.*

In another place, Jesus told some very religious Jewish leaders that their father was not Abraham, or God, as they claimed, but the devil.

John 8:44 *You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.*

These were religious people, but as far as Jesus was concerned, all their fine words and acts of outward devotion to God didn't matter. Ultimately, their actions proclaimed it; they were the devil's children.

So John warns us, his dear children, not to be led astray by people's words, but look beyond words to consistent patterns of behavior. Those will reveal a person's true identity.

A final point on this verse: This gives us some insight into the origin and purpose of evil. Both angels and human beings were created to worship and serve God and live in the midst of His blessings. All of this requires a free response from the side of God's creatures. The devil was the first rebel, and many have since followed him in rebellion. Christ came to destroy the devil's works. Ultimately he will throw the devil himself into the lake of fire.

3:9 Only Christ can live a totally righteous life. His life is implanted in us when we are born again. When we sin, the reason is that we are not allowing Christ's resurrection life in all its power to pour into our thoughts and intentions.

Illustration: A father telling his son, "That's not how we behave in this house," or, "We can't act like that." Obviously, we literally can, but that completely misses the father's point.

3:10 Righteousness by itself is certainly preferable to unrighteousness. But without love it might appear aloof or judgmental. John adds the quality of brotherly love to remind us that God's righteousness is not a self-righteousness, but a righteousness that is also aware of others in the family and their needs.

We can even say that love is righteousness expressed in relationship with others. It's not first and foremost an emotional thing. It's an act of will. It is not feeling mushy and warm towards other people in some vague way. It means doing good to specific individuals.

Again, David Jackman,

"Love as a feeling only is useless. No marriage can survive on feelings. Love has to be expressed in caring and sharing, in hard work and loyalty, in generosity and long-suffering. That's the love without which we have no right to claim to be God's children. Of course it is superhuman. It does not grow naturally in this world's soil. ... But where it exists, there is positive proof of the life of God in the soul of man, and so of authentic membership of God's family."

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Application:

- In God's family we have finally found a home. The longing to belong, the need to be needed, the desire to be desired – they are all fulfilled fully and finally when we find our place in the family of God. We are His children and that makes everything OK.
- Like any good father, God places expectations upon his children. He doesn't want us to rebel against Him. He doesn't want us to be losers – like the devil, for example. He doesn't want us imitating the wrong crowd and picking up all their bad habits.
- Family requirements that God places upon us have to do with avoiding sin. Living righteously and loving our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- None of these things come naturally to us. They imparted by the Holy Spirit as we willing submit to His work in our hearts and minds.
- Keys to growth in the Christian life that John expresses here are:
 - Abiding in Christ. **(3:6)**
 - Remembering the purposes for Christ's first coming. **(3:5 and 3:8)**
 - Staying focused on Christ's return. **(3:2-3)** That moment will be a lot like this:

"But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." – Closing lines of Lewis's *The Last Battle*