

Love is Belonging

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[0 : 00] Derek gave me a tough text. It's a hard one. John is a very old man when he writes this book. He's old and he's wise.

And this book, in the words of a very old and wise man, is very practical. And in some ways simple and in some ways very profound. The point of the book is this, no God and love your brother. That's the point of the book. We see that in 1 John 5.13. He literally spells out the point of the book. He says, I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know you have eternal life.

So he's telling us why. He's telling us why he's writing. That you may know you have eternal life. This is a book about assurance. If you're a Christian here tonight, if you've been born again of God, if you believe in Jesus, this is a book that's targeted towards you to give you assurance. Not to take it away. Okay. So if you pay careful attention to the text, you might be tempted to walk away from that text and want your assurance to be ripped away.

[1 : 25] Because John says things in this text like verse 3, chapter 3 verse 6. Look at it with me. No one who abides in him, that's Christ, keeps on sinning.

Now, if you're like me, when you read that, you're screaming inside and saying, but I keep on sinning. Right? But it says no one who abides in him keeps on sinning.

And so there's a temptation in the letters of John to have your assurance ripped from you. But he says this is for your assurance.

He says in 1 John 3, 14, we know that we have passed from death into life. You're not going to die forever is what John's saying. That's why he's writing.

But John, I keep on sinning. This week, Monday to Saturday, today, my mind, my thought life, the way I treat my family, you put yourself in this fill in the blank scenario.

[2 : 37] We keep on sinning. So what do we do with this? So what I want to do for the next few minutes is just ask two questions of this text.

I think they're very practical. I think they'll be pertinent for everyone here. And it's this, what does John mean by words like born again or abiding in Christ or being a child of God?

It's all over the text. If you look down, he says in 29, has been born of him. Verse one, I've been called a child of God. We are God's children now.

We abide in him. We are righteous. We have been born of God. Are the children of God? He uses these present tense terms all over the place. We are, we are, we are, we do, we do.

We abide in him. We are his. We're children. We're born. What does he mean by this? That's the first question. And the second question we'll ask is this. If you are born again tonight, can you have any assurance if you keep on sinning?

[3 : 50] Is it available? If you're a person that like me that keeps on sinning, can you have any assurance that you have been born again? So that's the two questions we're going to look at for a few minutes.

Question one, what's John mean by being born again? There's two things to understand to get at what he means by this. And the two things are, one, the context of this passage and two, the words he uses.

Okay, so what's, what's going on here in the book of John? Why is he writing? John ministered, we think, to a group around a city called Ephesus where the letter, the Ephesians was written to.

And it's probably a circular letter, meaning that it was a lot of different churches in this area. This is in the very southwest of Turkey today. And what happened is after he's ministered there for a while, some false teachers, he calls them Antichrist in other places, come in and they start saying things like this.

Jesus was not really God. Jesus is an example. Jesus came to this earth to show you how to think about this world, about life.

[5 : 06] So the first thing they said, Jesus, Jesus is not God. The second thing they taught is this, look, religion is not about doing. And in some sense we agree with that, right?

Religion is merely a thing of the mind. So if you want to be a Christian, you want to be religious, separate yourself from the world. Be devoted to the spiritual world and the flesh doesn't matter, right?

Now that kind of sounds okay, but what are the consequences? The consequence is it doesn't matter how you act. It doesn't matter what you do day to day.

It doesn't matter how you live your sexual life. It doesn't matter if you're married or not. It doesn't matter if you cheat, right? It doesn't matter if you steal food. Nothing matters in the fleshly world. All that matters is being one with God through your mind. So it's kind of a philosophical, weighty thing. And they said a lot more stuff than that, but that's basically what we think they said.

[6 : 13] So John, you can see, is writing saying, look, people in the church in Ephesus doing is very much a part of Christianity.

Believing the gospel, yes. And living in obedience to God, yes. It matters how you act. It matters what you do with your flesh.

It matters what you do with your body, okay? That's why he's saying all this stuff about lawlessness and sin and righteousness, because he's writing to people who are being bombarded with this.

It doesn't matter how you live. Live however you want. Do whatever you want on Saturday night. Don't care as long as your mind is attuned with God. And so that's what he's combating.

That's the context. Now, secondly, let me just illustrate a little bit of what something like kind of related from Scotland. If you know anything about Scottish history, you know that Scotland was one of the centers of the Enlightenment.

[7 : 14] The movement that transformed the way the universities operate and things like that. And what the Enlightenment did was it said reason and thinking and the human person should be the centerpiece of everything.

It was all about humans and their thinking. And so one of the ways some of the Scottish Enlightenment figures got at that, like David Hume, Thomas Reid, and others, was to rethink morality.

And they basically said that, look, we don't actually need religion to have a moral society. We don't really need it. We don't actually need this Jesus figure to enable a moral, ethical, a good life.

Maybe there's a God, maybe there isn't. You can still be attuned to him without all the miraculous, the supernatural, all that stuff. And actually a minister named James McPherson claimed to find these tablets up in the highlands.

Some of you probably know about this called the Ossian tablets. And he wrote out that it was poetry. And it read a lot like ancient Greek poetry, like something like the Odyssey or the Iliad.

[8 : 30] And this was a huge find because what he did was he wrote a whole book of poems based on this guy named Ossium. And Ossium lived this super heroic, noble life.

And he was considered a star, a hero of the Gallic-speaking world. But Ossium didn't have religion. It was pre-Christian. It was pre-religion. And so what they said was, look, here's an example.

You don't need all this miracle stuff. You can do a good life. You can be connected with the creator, whoever that may be, without all this extra gospel stuff.

And that's something like what's going on here in 1 John. All right, so that was a long context, but don't worry, we won't go long.

Words. John's words are critical here. They require really careful attention. Okay, so if you read it quickly and you get the word order backwards, man, you're going to be in some trouble.

[9 : 34] So let's come down to verse 29. And this is where we'll answer the first question about being born again. Verse 29, if you know that he, that's Jesus, is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

All right, so you see that word order. Everyone who practices righteousness has, and we could insert, already.

Everyone who practices righteousness has already been born of him. Okay, now look, there are people out there walking the streets that are nicer than some of us.

Okay, I know there are people out there nicer than me. All right, what John's not saying here is equating this word righteous with just being good or nice or kind or picked your nice, your good, your good virtue, right?

That's not what he's talking about. He's making a really important distinction. Every other religion, including Christianity, basically looks very similar when it comes to writing out law codes, moral commands, Confucius, you know, you've heard of him, the Eastern Chinese area philosopher back in 500 something BC.

[11:03] He basically wrote out a set of commandments that looked just like the Ten Commandments. I mean, they're very similar except they don't refer to God, our God, the Christian God.

There are tons of people out there that do nice things, that do good things, and so they get held up and say, why do I need Christianity? Why do I need religion?

When I'm a nice guy, I do good things. But what John is doing here is he's making a big time distinction that doing good things, living a nice life, not killing anybody, not cheating on your wife, whatever, that's not righteousness.

Okay? And that word crops up all over the place in the New Testament, righteousness, right? If you read Paul, you know he's talking about right, right, right, right, righteous all the time.

And so what John is doing, he's making a distinction between those two things. Alright, so what he's saying is this, to be righteous, to do what is right in this Bible, according to this word, is actually to please God.

[12:19] It's not just to be nice, but it's actually to please God. So what he's doing is he's setting up for you this vision of us before the throne room of God.

We're standing there before our maker. And it doesn't matter how many nice things we did in this life, how many times we helped people move, none of that matters.

That doesn't get righteousness. What is he saying that does get righteousness? What does please God? And he says it, he says, being born again.

You want to please God, you got to be born again first. Only then will what you do actually be right. So the new birth does not presuppose you were a pretty nice guy or gal. It actually presupposes that you weren't, you see. It actually presupposes that there was something wrong, that you had an issue before God, that you didn't stand right with Him, that you were not righteous no matter how nice you were.

[13:37] You know, anybody, like most people have read the Sermon on the Mount or at least encountered it in pop culture. I mean, it doesn't really matter who you are, atheist or not.

I mean, Renter Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, you read or listening to them, they love the Sermon on the Mount. It's fantastic, right? You read the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus is saying, love people more than yourself.

Be meek, be humble, be mild. If somebody asks you to do something, do more. If somebody slaps you in the face, let them slap you again.

Be a humble servant. That's what the Sermon on the Mount says. Look, I would love to embrace the Sermon on the Mount. I love the ethics that you guys talk about in places like this.

But I don't want the miracle stuff, the supernatural change, the Jesus is God stuff. I don't want that.

[14:36] But look, if you really read the Sermon on the Mount carefully, if you really read it, what do you find out? That the Sermon on the Mount is not delivered for us to have an ethic that we can actually live by.

It's there to slap you around, to hit you in the face, to throw you on the ground before God and say, I can't do any of this.

I don't have the tools to do any of this. I mean, he says things like, look, you think you're good because you've never committed adultery? If you've ever even thought about it, you've committed adultery.

And immediately you read that and you say, man, I can't live up to this. That's what John's talking about is the difference between being righteous and being nice.

So you cannot do then what is right without a miracle, without a miracle.

[15:43] The new birth, the being born again is a miracle. And so what is it exactly? Just to find it quickly. The best place to get out what the new birth is, is found actually in another thing that John wrote.

And that's John chapter 3. Nicodemus, you remember? He wants to see, he wants to meet with Jesus, but he's a bit scared. So he meets with him at night and he says, how can I become a child of God?

How can I enter into the kingdom of God? And what does Jesus say? You must be born again. And now one of the big themes in all the books and letters of John is misunderstanding.

You remember the misunderstanding that took place there? Nicodemus goes, whoa, what? You mean I literally have to be born a second time?

I don't think that's going to work. He literally thinks he's talking about being born again by his earthly mother. It's a complete misunderstanding.

[16:46] But Jesus goes on to say this, no one has ascended into heaven except he who descends from heaven, the Son of Man.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. So when Nicodemus is confused, when he has no idea what the new birth really is, what is Jesus talking about? Jesus just says this cryptic message, look, no one sees God.

No one gets to heaven except by he who has descended from heaven in order that he may with you ascend. What does that mean? It's a cryptic statement.

What he's saying is this, you cannot be born again except by the only one who has descended from heaven to earth. He's talking about himself.

He's saying, look, if you want to be born again, what you need is me. You need my life. You need my death. And he says right there that he is fulfilling a story that happened in the Old Testament when Moses lifted up a serpent on a pole and the people looked at it for salvation.

[17:58] Jesus is saying, look, that's me. I am that pole. I am that serpent. You want to be saved? Look up. And what was he pointing to when people were to look up? Himself on the cross.

I will be lifted up as the serpent, as the pole. This is where you need salvation. This is where you get new birth.

So what John does then in this book and all his letters is he gives us the way to be righteous.

Now, we're going to do a brief little segment of theology. It's going to be great. So just stay tuned for a moment for just a second. This is good stuff.

This is Pauline. This is John. It's great. The word for righteousness here that you see and the word for justification that you see all throughout the New Testament, they actually are almost the same exact word.

[19:00] We don't see it in English because we've got different letters and all that. But they're really close together. They're almost the same word. And so when you talk about righteousness, what you're talking about is in some ways justification.

Now, what is justification? Justification is simply this. Justification is how you are viewed by God. How you are viewed by God. Let me illustrate it. This is something that has happened in America many times, few times. I don't think it could ever happen here, thankfully. Probably not. But imagine that you're, there's this young boy and he goes to school one day and he walks up and he sees this teenager bigger than him, stronger than him, athlete, all these things.

And the boy, the 13-year-old or whatever, punches this kid in the face. I mean, just clocks him, knocks him out cold, breaks his jaw. He's laying there on the floor and immediately what happens? The teachers come out, the principal comes out. This boy's expelled, right? You're done. Get out. Call in the parents. Don't come back to this school. You're going to the county school or whatever it may be.

[20:10] You're going to Juvia, as we say in the States. Now, the boy simply very quietly and calmly looks over at the teacher and says, Look in that boy's pocket.

And he looks in the pocket and immediately where do they find? They find a gun. This has happened a few times in the States. Now, has the boy that punched the older kid done anything different?

He still punched him, right? He still broke his jaw. He still did all these things. But immediately he is being viewed completely differently, right?

Not based on anything he did with the punch, but simply the circumstance. Immediately he's vindicated. Immediately he's justified.

He's gone from villain to hero. He will be on the news. He will be on CNN that very night. He will make money from this. In some ways, when Christ came, what he did was he said, You who are

going to be my people, I'm taking everything you've ever done, all your sin, all your lawlessness, all the times you tried to be nice and failed, because none of it was righteous in God's sight.

[21 : 34] I'm putting it on me. I'm going to the cross and dying, not because I deserve it, but because you deserve to die. But I'm going to do it.

And so when Christ was resurrected, what happened there is that he was actually being justified. You see? Not because of anything he did wrong, but because of what we did wrong.

And what happens in turn is that because Christ defeated death, was justified for our sin, we get justification. We get to be viewed differently.

We haven't done anything. What happens is, what John is talking about with the word righteousness here, is that God simply looks at you from heaven and he sees you in a different light than he did before, as one without sin.

He sees Jesus when he looks at you. You literally, when God looks at you tonight, he actually sees Christ. He sees Christ.

[22 : 36] So to close the first point and the second point will be much briefer. You, if you were a believer tonight, if you have repented, if you look to Christ for salvation, if you trust him, you are born again.

And if you are born again, you can be righteous. That's his first big point.

All right, secondly, and then we'll be faster with this question. Don't worry. But still, if all that's true, how do we make sense of the fact that John seems to be saying, like verse 6 that we read earlier, that if you have been born again tonight, if you are a Christian, if you consider yourself a repented believer, what do we make, what do we do with the fact that he says no one who abides in Christ keeps on sinning?

I thought this book was about assurance. That doesn't give me any assurance. What do we do with that? Remember that John is talking to a people here who are being told that doing is not a part of Christianity.

Doing makes no difference. Doing is to be thrown out the door, live like you want. All that matters is that you've been born again in some spiritual sense, but live any way you like.

[24 : 06] That's what they're being told. Now, this may be kind of a shocking statement at first, but part of what John is saying is this.

The end all be all of Christianity is not the Gospel. Okay? Jesus' life, death and resurrection is not the end of Christianity.

It's actually the means. You see, God has a much bigger plan for your life. If you've been looking for God's plan for your life, it's actually this, that he wants to dwell with you.

He wants to get you with him person to person, walk hand in hand, feast together at the dinner table of his throne room.

That's the end of Christianity. To get back to Genesis 1 and 2, but even more to move beyond it to Revelation 21.

[25 : 06] That's the end of Christianity. The Gospel is the means. And so what John does here is he couches all this in language of the end of this earth.

He says things like this in verse 2, Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared, but we know that when he appears, we will be like him, because we will see him as he is.

So listen, what John is doing with these tough verses that say things like, if you keep sinning, you don't abide in Christ, he's talking about the end of this world when Christ returns.

And what he's saying is, if you have been born again, you will be righteous. You will be made righteous. When he appears, you will be like him, because just being born again, just being justified, just believing in Jesus the first time, you know, however you may have done it, whenever you may have done it, that's not the end.

The end is actually to be holy with God face to face. That's where we're going. The Gospel is how we get there.

[26 : 21] And so what he's simply saying is this, people, be who you already are. In other words, you are a born again Christian.

God sees you as righteous, so become that way. Become actually righteous. Grow in faith. Pursue holiness.

Don't think that because you've already agreed to Christianity that it's done, now all you've got to do is show up. No, he's saying the end all be all is holiness.

It is to be like Jesus. It is to see him face to face. That you can't have one without the other, so that if you think, or if you live in such a way that doing does not matter, and you claim to be born again, then you've actually missed what it is to be born again.

To be born again is to be given a heart and a spirit that does want to grow. But what he's not saying is this, if you keep failing, if you're struggling, if you keep on sinning, you've got no place with God.

[27 : 35] That's not what he's saying. Now let me just prove that to you really quickly. Is John saying that you can be sinless in this life now? No. There are no sinless Christians.

How do we know that? John says it, and John 1-8. He says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. He says, we, we, we, right?

Remember, he said that this book is for born again Christians. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. Born again Christians have sin. We struggle. And then the second thing he says is, the born again whose sin have an advocate still, you still need Jesus.

He says this in John, 1 John 2-1, my little children, I'm writing these things to you so that you may not sin, but if you do, we have an advocate with the Father.

Jesus Christ the righteous. In other words, if you are struggling tonight with doubt, some of you are, there's no doubt about that.

[28 : 44] Some people in here are struggling with sin, I mean with doubt. You week to week, you just don't know who you are. You don't know if when you die you will see God.

One of the things John is telling you is, just because you continue to struggle with sin, don't think that you are disqualified. Now this is made most clear in this last verse we'll read.

1 John 5, 16 and 17. 1 John sees his brother committing a sin that leads to death, he shall ask and God will give him life. To those who commit sins that do not lead to death, or to those who commit sin that do not lead to death.

So in other words he's saying this, look there are sins that lead to death and that's denying Jesus. But he says even if you do that there's still a way to live and that's to repent.

Just ask God and you will be given life. So two problems he's addressing. One is some of you struggle with doubt.

[29 : 53] You can't go a day without doubting your salvation. Look doubting is nothing but compounding sin. Because what doubting is saying is this, Jesus death was enough for God to forgive me.

But Jesus death was not enough for me to forgive myself. If Jesus was enough for God to forgive you, then forgive yourself. Don't hold on to a higher standard than God's holding.

Don't hold on to doubt. You have an advocate. Go to Christ. Or on the flip side, maybe your problem is not doubt, maybe your problem is carelessness.

You're struggling with exactly the problem that was here in Ephesus. That you just don't care. Sometimes, right? If we were to raise hands, I hope everybody would.

That sometimes when you sin as a Christian you don't care. That's me. That's the other problem he's addressing.

[30 : 59] And all he's simply saying to us is this, righteousness, the pursuit of holiness, all those things are required, need to be in place to live the Christian life.

Keep the end, the final goal, being with Jesus in your mind, and it will help you to break the carelessness. That's simply what he's saying.

When you either could care less or you care so much that you don't think you even believe anymore, you've got hope. Go to your advocate.

Go to Christ. Pray to him. Immerse yourself in his word. He will forgive you. God has forgiven you if you're a believer tonight.

Believe him. The gospel reward is simply that you get God. You get God. And I'll close with just reading verse two. So just listen.

[32 : 03] Just listen to verse two. Just don't look. Don't worry about looking at it. Just listen. That's how people would have actually probably received this letter. It's just hearing it.

Beloved, we are God's children now. What we will be has not yet come about.

But we know that when Jesus appears, we will be like him because we will see him as he is. Let's pray.

Father, we ask now that you would, for those of us that are Christians tonight, born again, that you would make us love holiness, love the pursuit of righteousness, fill a great assurance in the fact that Jesus is our advocate.

And for those of us maybe that aren't God, we ask that you would help them to see what being born again is, what believing on Christ looks like, that you would give them the gift of faith.

[33 : 05] We have some simple prayer. We ask that in Jesus' name. Amen.