



## Walking in the Light

1 John 2:28 – 3:10

### PURSUING HOLINESS TOGETHER, Part 1

David Sunday

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If the most beautiful, attractive, compelling life that any human being ever lived on earth was also the holiest life that any human being has ever lived—and it was—it was the life of Jesus. He was most attractive, compelling and beautiful. He is the holy, holy, holy Lord in Whom is light and no darkness at all. If the most attractive life lived was also the holiest life lived, then the most attractive, compelling and beautiful lives being lived today—in terms of attracting people to the gospel—are also the holiest lives. There's no contradiction between the holiness of believers and the mission of the church. In fact, it is through truly beautiful and holy lives that the church goes into the world and advances the gospel in a compelling way.

So in these three weeks at the beginning of this new year Dan Leeper and I will be setting the tone for what we hope will be a work of the Holy Spirit in our church throughout 2016, enabling us to pursue holiness together. If I were to define what I hope would mark our church's life this year, it would be an increased or intensified joyous pursuit of holiness that then thrusts us out in a revived mission to this community, our neighbors and the nations.

Let's begin by turning to 1 John and going to the heart of the vision—the beauty of holiness—that the Apostle John sets for us in 1 John 3:1-3. This passage is designed to capture our imagination, creating a vision for us of what it will be like to be completely holy and, in light of that vision, to be propelled and compelled to pursue holiness in the here and now. So let's read and worship as we do God's holy, abiding Word that will never fail, beginning in 1 John 2:28:

*<sup>28</sup> And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. <sup>29</sup> If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.*

*<sup>3:1</sup> See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why*

*the world does not know us is that it did not know him. <sup>2</sup> Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. <sup>3</sup> And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.*

*<sup>4</sup> Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup> You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup> No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. <sup>7</sup> Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup> Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup> No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. <sup>10</sup> By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.*

Lord, we thank You for the potency, the penetrating light, the transforming grace of Your Word. Through Your Spirit, You make new creations out of Your Word. Through Your Spirit, You sanctify us with Your Word. We pray for a full measure of Your Spirit's illumination, anointing and empowerment, so that we will leave here having encountered You in Your Word and becoming more like You. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

I love so many hymns in the Christian church that it would be impossible for me to name a favorite. It would probably be impossible for me to even limit myself to 25 favorite hymns. But if I were to have to list the top ten stanzas in Christian hymnody that have inspired me the most, I am sure these words from William Cowper would be in that top ten list:

Dear dying Lamb, [Your] precious blood  
Shall never lose its power  
'Til all the ransomed church of God  
Be saved to sin no more...

(There Is A Fountain Filled With Blood, 1772)

I long for that. Can you imagine waking up one day and never again feeling the impulses of greed, lust, jealousy, pride, envy? Never speaking words you later regret? Never becoming filled with anger again? Never having to forgive anyone because you live in a world in which no one sins? And you have no indwelling sin left. You are "saved to sin no more." Oh! I would give

everything if I could be guaranteed I'd never sin again. I would walk in perfect holiness. This passage tells us the day is coming when we will be "saved to sin no more." The words are so magnificent; it's almost embarrassing to try to comment on them.

Derek Tidball, a British theologian, says this passage is like a grand symphony. We have a prelude in 1 John 2:28-29, a main movement in 3:1-3, and then a postlude in 3:4-10. While it's wonderful throughout, I want to focus on the main movement, the main point which is this: "What we shall be in the future determines what we should be in the present."

## Present

Now, if you were going to move into a new house in February, I doubt you would spend a whole lot of money in January trying to put new landscaping in your backyard. If you live in Illinois, you shouldn't spend any money from January through April on landscaping your backyard. On the other hand, if you were going to move next month, you would not put a lot of money into your present house. You just do the basics so you'd be saving for your future destination, preparing to live there. In the same way, what we will be in the future should shape, mold and determine how we live in the present. That's what John is telling us here in this wonderful passage.

Now, who are we in the present? Let's get that straight. First John 3:1, "*We are dearly loved children of God.*" Now, I'm speaking to people who believe in Jesus. I'm speaking to people who have new life by the Spirit, who sing:

Lord, I need You  
Oh, I need You  
Every hour I need You  
My one defense  
My righteousness  
Oh, God how I need You

[Lord I Need You by Matt Maher]

If that's you, you're a child of God. And God loves you—not begrudgingly or stingily with a rationed love. "I'll give you a little bit of love today, but I've got to save it up for however long you're going to live. I don't want to give you too much because I don't have a whole lot. So here's just a little bit of love."

That's not the love of God. God has great love that He has lavished on us. There's an overflowing generosity, and the heart of God the Father wants nothing more than to share with

His children the bounties of His love. He wants us to experience what it's like to be royal children of the King, and as His royal children, we love to obey our Father's commandments. We want to do what's pleasing to Him. His commandments are not burdensome to us. His presence is our joy. We long to live in His house, to walk in His nearness, to obey His commands, to honor His name in this world—because He loves us.

This is what we are, John says in verse one. We are children of God. Now, the world doesn't treat us like royal princesses and princes of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, because the world does not know our Father and does not belong to His Kingdom. You see, there are two kingdoms in this passage: the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil. The reason the world does not know us for who we are is that it did not know Him.

## Future

Then John moves from what we are right now to what we will be in the future. Look at verse two where he repeats: "Beloved, dear children, dearly loved ones..." I always picture John as an old, old man when he's writing this, a warm-hearted, grandfatherly, loving apostle, calling us his dear children. I want to meet this apostle of love in glory someday.

He says, "*Beloved, we are God's children now.*" Make no mistake about it. If you believe in Jesus, you're a child of God. No one can pluck you from the Father's hand (John 10:27-30). You are graven on the palms of His hands (Isaiah 49:16), written on His heart. You are the apple of His eye (Zechariah 2:8). You are His child and you will be forever. You are God's child now.

Yet, there's this reality in verse two: "*What we will be has not yet appeared.*" Every parent knows what it's like to hold an infant child in your arms —your child. You look at that infant, and you wonder, "What will he be? What will she be? When they grow up, what will his personality be like? How will she develop?" And we don't know what they will be like. We can only imagine in the faintest way what this fully mature personality is going to become.

It's like watching "Little House on the Prairie." You can't imagine a flat-screen TV being in Laura Ingalls Wilder's log cabin in northern Wisconsin in the 1800s. They had no concept of what it would be like to be able to turn on this thing at 5:00 and get live news streamed from all over the world. And that was 150, 160 years ago? Some of the things we have now were inconceivable then.

I took one computer class when I was in high school and it was very elementary. I remember carrying around a floppy disc to stick in the computer. I could save maybe 10 or 15 files on those things. Now we've got jump drives and can save way more information on them. We couldn't imagine in 1988 what it would be like to have the cloud, where we have all this

information immediately accessible to us. I never knew what the internet was when I was in high school, or even college. I couldn't have imagined what it would be like back then.

Or I remember Pleasant Prairie, Wisconsin, where Kate and I grew up—five minutes north of the Illinois state line. We had a lot of friends who lived in Winthrop Harbor and Zion, Illinois. My mom and dad always said, “David, don't make too many phone calls to Zion or to Winthrop Harbor,” because it was a long distance phone call and it cost a fair amount of money if we talked for 20 minutes to one of our friends. I could not have imagined what it would be like to hold a small cell phone and be able to call Keith McFarland in Uganda, over Wi-Fi, see his face on the screen and talk to him for an hour—for free. It was inconceivable just a few years ago.

John is telling us, “You are God's children now, and what you have is good. He has lavished His love on you. Be confident of that. But what you have now cannot begin to compare with what you will experience in the future.” You see, for God's children now, what you will be has not yet appeared. But here's the key. Here's what needs to capture our imagination today. In the second part of verse two he says, “*But we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*”

O Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight  
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll  
The trump shall resound and our Lord shall descend

[It Is Well With My Soul by Horatio Spafford, 1873]

That's what John is talking about here. We shall see Him as He is. So there's a time in the future when God's work will be completed in us. John calls that time “*when He appears*,” the *parousia*, the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ. God's work is going to be completed on time, with no delays, with no postponement and no excuses. It's not like most construction projects today that get delayed, adjustments have to be made and you have to compromise. No. God's work will be completed precisely when God determines it shall be completed, and that's when He appears.

Right now we are being changed by the Holy Spirit in our lives, but it's slow. Second Corinthians 3:18 says we are being changed as we behold Christ by faith “*from one degree of glory to another.*” It's a slow, sometimes painful, sometimes frustrating change. We've got to deal with our failures and conflict. We make three steps forward and take two steps back. We stumble and grow weary of the slowness of our change into the image of Christ. But one day it's going to be instantaneous. God's work is going to be completed.

I remember back in the '70s my Aunt Bree, who is about 12 years older than I am, was going to a hippy-like youth group. Like a lot of people, she wore a button that said “BPBWGMGINFWMY.” Does anyone remember what that stands for? “Please Be Patient With

Me. God Is Not Finished With Me Yet.” That stuck in my mind as a kid because it was just so weird to see this white button on my aunt’s coat.

But that’s the stage we’re in right now. We’re in the PBPWMGINFWMY phase of Christian living. We’re in the phase that John Newton described like this:

I am not what I ought to be;  
I am not what I want to be;  
I am not what I hope to be in another world;  
but still, I am not what I once used to be,  
and by the grace of God I am what I am.

So we’re waiting. We’re going through change, but it’s not over yet. Jesus is going to appear, and when He does we shall be like Him. Instantaneous transformation. Isn’t that great? The saintliest person right now still has an infinite distance to go to be conformed to the image of Christ. The most holy person you know is not nearly as holy as Jesus is. And when we die, when they put us in the ground, they’re not going to say, “That was a perfect person we just buried.” But when we see Jesus, boom! We shall be like Him. God finishes His work in us.

How does that happen? It’s because we see Him as He is in glory, then we become what we behold. That can start to happen even now. Look back at 1 John 1, where John wants us to understand that the only original event in the history of humankind was the incarnation of God the Son that we just celebrated at Christmas. John speaks of the physical reality of that incarnation and says, “You can have fellowship with the living Christ right now.”

*That which was from the beginning, 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—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)*

So John wants us to understand that right now you can experience fellowship with Christ. He’s in glory—we’re still on earth—but we really can know Him. He really came into the world. He is the God-Man and we can know Him. And the more we get to know Him, the more we become like Him. There’s coming a day in the future when we will be completely like Him because we’ll stand face to face with Him.

So the question I want to leave us with is this: if it’s true that when we see Christ there’s going to be an instantaneous transformation into His holiness, then does it really matter if we

pursue holiness here and now? If it's going to happen instantaneously and completely when we see Him face to face, can we just sort of take it easy now?

John says that way of thinking is devilish. That's the way the children of the devil think. That's not the way children of God think. Children of God think, "If I'm going to see Him as He is, if He's going to appear and I'm going to become like Him, then I want to be ready for His coming and I want to become as much like Him now as it is possible for a man or woman to be, through the fullness of His Spirit in my life. I want to be pursuing holiness, without which no one can see the Lord. I want to get to know Him better, and when He appears I want to be one who has been striving to be like Him."

John says in 1 John 2:6, "I want to be one who is walking in the same way in which He walked." So a Christian is someone who is beginning the process now, decontaminating himself from sin. That's what we see in verse three. Everyone who thus hopes in Him, everyone who's looking forward to His appearing and becoming like Him as He is—if that really is your hope, this is the proof in your life. You are purifying yourself as He is pure.

That's the test. If you have the hope of being like Christ in glory—in the future—you are demonstrating that hope by the pursuit of Christ-likeness in the present. If you hope to be completely sanctified in His presence, you are then a person who is pursuing sanctification in the present. That's what John is saying here. We are practicing the tunes we're going to sing in glory now. We are learning holiness now.

What we're hoping for is that the Holy Spirit will revive us this year in a very particular way as a church, so that by the end of this year we will see this is a church that has grown both in the pursuit of holiness and in the advancement of the gospel into our community—to our neighbors and the nations. What we hope to see throughout our times of worship together this year is that these two things are inseparable. We must be growing in holiness in order to advance the gospel, because holiness is what makes the gospel beautiful and attractive to the world.

When I was a senior in high school I sang in the *a cappella* choir, and as choir directors and musicians often are, my choir director was a temperamental man. I don't know what it is about musicians, but they can be some of the most passionate, opinionated and hard-nosed people. His name was Curt Shaldrin. He was my mom's choir director when she was in high school, so he had been around for a while and he was good. He knew how to make a choir sing, and he did not put up with any monkeying around. If you did not work hard, he let you know it. I remember times when we'd be back in the practice rooms with our sections, and his face would get bright red. He would just tell us, "That's not good enough! That is not going to be acceptable." It was a little intimidating. But he produced good music, and I really appreciate it.

I had gone through all of high school and was getting ready to graduate. I was feeling pretty good about myself right before our senior concert. But he got mad at the choir while we were practicing. His face was beet red. He was yelling at us. And I remember that a boldness rose up in me. I stepped out of my place and I got up in Mr. Shaldrin's face. I said, "Mr. Shaldrin, you shouldn't talk to us like that." As soon as I said it, I thought, "That was a big mistake. Why did I just do that?" I started shrinking back in shame from him and will never forget what he said. He looked in my face, in front of the whole choir and said, "David Sunday! You want to be a pastor some day? That is totally out of character for you to speak to me like that." I just remember trembling through that whole choir concert, thinking, "How am I going to apologize to Mr. Shaldrin for acting so rudely, so out of place, so out of character?"

This is what John is saying to believers. "Child of God, heir of salvation, your Savior came to destroy the works of the devil." What is the devil's work? It's sin. Sin is the devil's firstborn child. Your Savior saved you, rescued you from the clutches of sin and Satan, and the seed of God your Father now dwells in you. That seed is going to grow until you are fully conformed to the image of Christ, His Son.

So, child of God, it is totally out of character for you to sin. You don't have to sin anymore. You're not obligated to sin any longer. Sin is not your master. You belong to Christ. So pursue holiness with joy. Pursue it with hope because you will be like Him when you see Him as He is.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, a computer was far beyond someone in the reality of someone in first century. Help us grasp the reality of what we will be in the future. . We pray that by Your Spirit we would more and more live in light of the return of Christ, in light of seeing Him face to face, which is our destiny. We pray that what we will be in the future would more thoroughly and consistently guide how we live in the present. Let us be a church that experiences the reviving power of Your Spirit this year. May we grow in holiness and may we advance Your gospel into the community. We ask for both and we pray all of this for Your glory. Amen.

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