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THE PURIFYING HOPE

1 John 3:2-3

By

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March 19, 2006

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1 John Lesson 14

The Purifying Hope 1 John 3:2-3

The evangelical church in America desperately needs holiness. In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* ([Baker], pp. 12-13), Ron Sider writes,

Scandalous behavior is rapidly destroying American Christianity. By their daily activity, most "Christians" regularly commit treason. With their mouths they claim that Jesus is Lord, but with their actions they demonstrate allegiance to money, sex, and self-fulfillment.

The findings in numerous national polls conducted by highly respected pollsters like The Gallup Organization and the Barna Group are simply shocking. "Gallup and Barna," laments evangelical theologian Michael Horton, "hand us survey after survey demonstrating that evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general." Divorce is *more* common among "born-again" Christians than in the general American population. Only 6 percent of evangelicals tithe. White evangelicals are the *most* likely people to object to neighbors of another race. Josh McDowell has pointed out that the sexual promiscuity of evangelical youth is only a little less outrageous than that of their nonevangelical peers.

It is also odd to me that American Christians are enamored with biblical prophecy, yet they ignore the application of prophetic truth to their daily lives. Several decades ago, the best-selling evangelical author of prophecy books left his wife and moved in with his girl friend, whom he subsequently married. The church that he was attending disciplined him, but he just shrugged it off and started his own church. He has continued to write best sellers and to appear on the Christian TV talk show circuit.

Our text confronts head on this deadly disease of the modern church. John shows that if you understand biblical prophecy

rightly, you *will* purify yourself from sin. He does not say that you *ought to* purify yourself, but rather, you *will* do it. The true hope of Christ's coming is a purifying hope. John says that...

Understanding our present position as children of God and our future hope of being like Jesus when He comes will motivate us to grow in holiness now.

These verses are closely connected with verse 1, which we studied last week. The Father's great love for us as His children is probably the strongest motivation for holy living. When you contemplate the staggering truth that God gave His own Son on the cross to forgive all of your sins and to make you His own child, it should compel you to be distinct from the world and to grow in holiness. John continues that theme by addressing his readers as "beloved." They are beloved by God and also by the aged apostle. He reminds us, again, that...

1. Our present position is that we are children of God.

John has just said in verse 1 that we are actually the children of God. Why does he repeat it again in verse 2? Because he wants to hammer this essential truth home and clinch it in our minds. He says, "now"—right now in the present, "we are children of God." That is our current position, and it ought to dominate every aspect of our daily lives.

For better or worse, the families into which we are born have a huge impact on how we grow up and live. Some grow up in unloving, abusive homes where anger flares up every day. The TV spews moral filth into the living room every evening, while the family wallows in it, laughing at the shameful antics. The Bible is never read, family prayer times are non-existent, and moral training, if it exists at all, consists of, "Make sure that you have safe sex." A child growing up in that kind of home is bound to be damaged by it, unless the grace of God through the gospel lays hold of him.

Other children grow up in godly homes, where love and kindness are the daily fare. The husband treats his wife with gentleness and respect, and the wife submits to and speaks well of her husband. The children are instructed in the ways of the Lord and they see it modeled in front of them every day. The family often reads the Bible and prays together. They worship with God's people on

Sundays. Growing up in that kind of home will have a far different impact on the children. Their position as children in that kind of home greatly affects how they think and live.

Perhaps you lament that you did not enjoy such a godly upbringing. But, if you have been born again by the Holy Spirit, you now are in such a godly family—the family of God. You can rightly call the holy, almighty God, “Father.” You are His beloved child, more precious to Him than any child is to his earthly father. As a child of God, you are an heir to a vast fortune. Paul puts it this way (Rom. 8:16-17), “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.” That new position of being a child of God in the family of God should shape how you think, how you live, and how you relate to the many temptations in this evil world.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes (*Children of God* [Crossway], p. 23), “I do feel that this is perhaps the greatest weakness of all in the Christian church, that we fail to realise what we are, or who we are.” He goes on to say that most of our unhappiness is due to our failure to relate our trials to our glorious position as children of God. He adds (p. 24), “If only we realised who we are, then the problem of conduct would almost automatically be solved.... The more I read the New Testament, the more I am impressed by the fact that every appeal for conduct and good living and behaviour is always made in terms of our *position*.” Godly conduct rests on our understanding of our true, great position as children of God.

If you begin to see this truth and allow it to shape your identity, it works out like this: You are tempted to engage in some sin or to join the world in some degrading form of entertainment. But you think, “I can’t do that because I’m a child of God and it would disgrace the name of my heavenly Father.” Or, you’re reading the Bible and it convicts you that some of your behavior is not godly. It may be lustful thoughts or a grumbling, ungrateful attitude or words that put down others. Perhaps you frequently bend the truth to cover up your own misdeeds. But when Scripture confronts you, you think, “I’m now a child of God. I can’t do that as a member of His family.” Your new identity motivates you to grow in holiness. John begins with the foundation of our present position.

2. Our future hope is that when Jesus comes, we will be like Him.

Note three things:

- A. Our future state is not yet completely revealed or known.

John adds (3:2), "and it has not appeared as yet what we will be." He seems to mean two things. First, since he immediately adds that when Jesus appears, we will be like Him, he means that presently we are not like Him. Our future state of glorified perfection, where we will be free from all the impurity of sin, is not a present reality. Right now, we live in the flesh. We are not and never will be perfectly sanctified in this life. Thus we need to grow in purity, as he goes on to say (3:3).

Also, John may be acknowledging that the fullness of our future state of glorification has not been completely revealed. "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12). Or, as Paul puts it (Col. 3:3-4), "For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory." But even though we cannot fathom everything that we will be in heaven, we can trust God that it will be far better than anything we can imagine. Our future hope of being totally conformed to the image of Jesus Christ should motivate us to holiness now.

- B. Our future transformation is linked to seeing Jesus just as He is.

As I understand it, John is saying that the instant that we see Jesus, we will become like Him. At the moment He comes, we will be totally sanctified in body, soul, and spirit. Of course, this only applies to those who are His children in this life. Unbelievers will see Jesus just as He is, but that sight will not transform them into His likeness. Rather, they will shrink away in shame and terror from His absolute holiness and the splendor of His glory (1 John 2:28). As John describes it in Revelation (6:16), they will call out "to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb'; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

The apostle John had seen the earthly Jesus with his own eyes (1 John 1:1). Believers have seen Him with eyes of faith (1 Pet. 1:8). Unbelievers, who live in sin, have not seen Him or known Him (1 John 3:6). But, when He comes again in power and glory, "every eye will see Him" (Rev. 1:7). At that glorious moment, all that believe in Jesus Christ in this life will be transformed completely into His image and be with Him for all eternity! Even though we may not know in great detail what awaits us in heaven, we can rest in this hopeful promise: we will see Him and be like Him and be with Him forever!

- C. Our future transformation is certain and will be instantaneous.

John says, "We know...." It is not, "we speculate," or, "the best forecasts indicate...." It is, "We *know!*" Biblical hope is not a good guess about the future. It is not, "There is a 50 percent chance that this will happen." It is 100 percent certain because it is based on the sure promises of God and on the testimony of His Son as relayed to us by the apostles in the New Testament. As Francis Schaeffer so helpfully pointed out, one of the errors of our times is to relegate faith to the "upper story," rather than to recognize that the Christian faith is rooted in true historical facts. In other words, the modern way of thinking is, "Your faith is your own subjective reality. It may be true for you personally, but it is not absolutely true for everyone."

But, the Bible is clear that God's truth about Jesus Christ is what Schaeffer called "true truth." It is supremely revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, all of which are historically validated. He fulfilled all of the Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah. His word about the future is not uncertain speculation. It is absolutely certain, but just not yet realized. We know certainly that He will appear and in that instant, we will be instantly transformed.

This instantaneous transformation will include our bodies. In the great chapter on the resurrection, Paul says (1 Cor. 15:50-53):

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep,

but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.

In Philippians 3:20-21, Paul refers to this same truth:

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

Since sin now dwells in our earthly bodies (Rom. 7:18, 23, 24; 8:10, 13), we have to do battle against it until we die or Jesus returns. But when He returns, instantly we will receive our new resurrection bodies. At that moment, we will be freed from all sin.

Thus John has shown us our present position as children of God and our future hope, that when Jesus comes, we will be like Him. In verse 3, he applies it:

3. Understanding our present position and our future hope will motivate us to grow in holiness now.

As I said, verse 3 does *not* say that if we have our hope fixed on Christ, we *ought to* purify ourselves. Rather, it says that everyone who has this hope fixed on Him *does* purify himself. In other words, the test of whether or not you truly understand the teaching of verse 2 will be evident in your practicing the truth of verse 3. If you understand that you are presently a child of God and that when Jesus comes, you will be like Him, then you will be progressively purifying your life, just as Jesus is pure. Note three things:

A. We must fix our hope on Jesus.

Although the word *hope* is frequent in Paul and in Peter's writings, this is the only time that John uses the noun. Oddly, it does not even occur in Revelation. As believers, our hope is not in circumstances or in some optimistic wish for a better tomorrow. Our hope is in the person of Jesus Christ. He said that He was returning to heaven to prepare a place for us (John 14:2). Then He added these wonderful words of hope (14:3), "If I go and prepare a

place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also." He didn't leave us forever! He's coming back for us, and when that happens, we will go to be with Him in the place that He has prepared for us! All of our hope should be fixed on Him.

Hope is one of the three cardinal virtues that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 13:13, faith, hope, and love. Christians should be people of hope, because we fix our hope on Jesus, who never disappoints. Depression is one of the most common psychological maladies of our day. I realize that there are complex factors involved in depression, some of them physiological. So I don't mean to be overly simplistic here. If you are a Christian who struggles with depression, get a medical checkup.

But before you start popping Prozac, do a study of what the Bible says about hope. Depressed people lack hope, but God promises hope to His people. Memorize some verses on hope, such as Romans 15:13: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Our God is the God of hope, and the hope that He gives centers on the Lord Jesus Christ.

B. We must come to know Him in His holiness.

The holiness of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ is a frequent theme in 1 John. In 1:5, he told us, "God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." In 2:1, he refers to Jesus as "Jesus Christ the righteous." In 2:20, he refers to Jesus as "the Holy One." In 2:29, he again affirms that "He is righteous." Here, he says, "He is pure." The word originally referred to ceremonial purity, but it came to mean that which is "pure in the highest sense" (R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], p. 333). It refers to freedom from all defilement of sin, especially moral sin.

As we've seen, in that glorious future day when we see Jesus, that vision will transform us. But I also believe that to the extent that we presently see Jesus in His holiness with the eyes of faith, to that same extent He will transform us into His glory. Paul says essentially the same thing (2 Cor. 3:18), "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being trans-

formed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

There is a similar thought in John 14:21, where Jesus says, “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.” If we want Jesus to disclose or reveal Himself to us, we must obey Him. It becomes, *not* a vicious cycle, but a *victorious* cycle, where when we obey, we see more of Jesus; this in turn makes us more like Him, which means that we see even more of Him. There is a transformational power in seeing Jesus for who He is, the Holy One. Of course, our only source for this knowledge is His Word.

Thus we must fix our hope on Him and we must come to know Him in His holiness.

C. We must purify ourselves now so that we will grow to be like Him.

John says (3:3), “Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself.” We need to maintain the biblical balance here. In Romans 8:29, Paul says that God has predestined us to become conformed to the image of His Son. In that sense, it’s a done deal and clearly, God does it. Yet at the same time, John says that we must purify ourselves. Paul says (2 Cor. 7:1), “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” He commands Timothy to keep himself pure [lit.] from sin (1 Tim. 5:22). James 4:8 commands, “Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” 1 Peter 1:22 says that believers have purified their souls. So, there is a definite sense in which we must be active in the process of purification from sin.

The other side is that only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us (1 John 1:7, 9). We are clean through the washing of water with the Word (Eph. 5:26). So God’s Word and His Holy Spirit are like the soap and water. But we’ve got to apply it to the dirt of our sin. The Word is also like a mirror, revealing to us the dirt on our faces. When it does that, rather than ignoring it, we must confess our sins to the Lord, apply His shed blood as our source of cleansing, and take the necessary steps to avoid that sin in the future. In brief, if

you can't imagine Jesus Christ, the righteous one, doing something, then you shouldn't do it either. Clean the filth out of your life, beginning on the thought level.

Conclusion

Maybe you're thinking, "But it's hard to let go of my sins!" If we're honest, we sin because we *enjoy* sinning, at least for the moment. We don't consider the long-term consequences. So we need motivation for purity. John says that our motivation should be that we are God's beloved children and that Jesus is coming to make us pure. These facts should motivate us to purify our lives now.

When Jimmy Carter was President, to promote his populist image, on several occasions he spent the night in the homes of common people. Of course, he didn't drop in unannounced! Those people had fair warning that he was coming on a particular date, and I'm sure that they had to agree to the visit. But, if you knew that the President would come at some unknown date to stay in your home, and that the news cameras would be there to broadcast the state of your living room to the entire world, I'll bet that you'd be motivated to clean house!

Jesus is coming. When you see Him in His glory, you will be like Him. If you have your hope fixed on Him, you'll start cleaning house now! You don't want the Lord who is pure to come to a filthy house!

Application Questions

1. What is at the root of the current evangelical moral scandal? Why aren't believers different than our culture?
2. Why are Christians so enamored with biblical prophecy, and yet they do not seem to apply it to their lives?
3. If we honestly don't yearn for the Lord's return, is there a problem? What should we do about it?
4. How can a depressed Christian gain hope? What steps would you advise?

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