

## II. COMMENTARY

### God's Children Must Not Live in Sin

**MAIN IDEA:** *Those who love God must live as he wants them to live. They must not go on sinning; rather, they must love their brothers in Christ not just in words but also in deeds.*

#### A. God Loves Us with Great Love ([2:28–3:3](#))

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *God is righteous and loves us with a great love. We who love him and hope to see him will purify our lives, as he is pure.*

[2:28–29](#). These two verses introduce the concerns of chapter [3](#). **Now, dear children** seems to introduce a major new section. Christians begin by believing and trusting in Jesus. Then what? We are to **continue** (or abide) **in him** so that when Jesus comes again, we may be **confident and unashamed**. This simple statement is actually very complicated. It has several interpretations:

1. *The reference is to unsaved individuals who will be ashamed at Jesus' coming.* This seems a difficult position to sustain, since verse [28](#) begins by addressing Christians. This is needless instruction for those who are already saved.
2. *We are to remain in fellowship with Jesus, or we will lose our salvation and be ashamed at Jesus' coming.* One might understand this isolated verse in that sense. Taken with the teachings of the entire New Testament, the opposite meaning is true. Christian theologians have debated this for almost two thousand years. A simple description focuses on two opposing positions given in oversimplified outline. The Armenian position is that a believer can lose his salvation. The Calvinist position is that once elected and saved by God, a person can never lose that gift of salvation (see [Deeper Discoveries](#)). More complete descriptions are available in Bible dictionaries, wordbooks, or theological dictionaries.
3. *We are to remain in fellowship with the Lord, or we, as Christians, will be ashamed at Jesus' coming.* We do not normally think of Christians being ashamed at the coming of Jesus. We must remember that at the judgment seat of Christ, a Christian's works are evaluated and eternal rewards are meted out. At that time the possibility of shame exists. [First Corinthians 3:10–15](#) says a person's works will be revealed as either perishable or imperishable: "His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light." On the appointed day when the Lord comes, he "will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts" ([1 Cor. 4:5](#)). Further, "we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" ([2 Cor. 5:9–10](#)).

These passages teach us that the judgment seat of Christ will be more than a Sunday school awards banquet. Experiencing shame at living an undisciplined life might be part of what we could face. [First John 2:28](#) reassures those who live normal Christian lives that they will not experience this shame. Only those who do not **continue in him** will do so.

That shame, should it be experienced, will be relatively short-lived. [Revelation 21:4](#) promises that God will wipe away every tear, as the things of this world pass forever. The shame is not a perpetual thing, but is something to be avoided.

**Everyone who does what is right has been born of him.** Here is another difficult statement. At first impulse, we can think of plenty of people who have done what is right but were not believers in Jesus. Does this mean they were **born of him** anyway? Ghandi, for example, lived a profoundly sacrificial life, completely given over to good deeds. He treated others as he wanted others to treat him. If someone struck him on one cheek, he turned the other cheek. If he saw someone who was in need, he sacrificed all he had to help him. He lived in poverty and gave away all he had. He spoke kindly to people and lived a life filled with more Christian principles than most Christians. Does this verse mean Ghandi was born of God because he did what is right?

If we had only this verse, we might come to this conclusion. But balanced with the rest of Scripture, this impression is reversed. Scripture makes it clear that it is through Jesus—and him alone—that we receive salvation ([John 14:6](#)). A correct understanding of and belief in Jesus is necessary for salvation ([1 John 2:22–23](#)). Therefore, someone such as Ghandi, who knowingly rejected Jesus, could not be born of God.

To understand these difficult sayings, we must continually come back to their context and intent. The church had been invaded by Gnostics. They claimed to know God through special inner knowledge. They believed that the spirit was good and was untouched by the physical, which was evil (see [Deeper Discoveries](#) on [1 John 1](#)). Therefore, the Gnostics believed they could sin flagrantly without remorse or consequence, since their spirits remained untouched by sin. They claimed to be Christian, to know God, but they hated Christians and lived sinful lives. God inspired this letter to challenge such people's claims to know Jesus. They must do what is right to validate that they are Christian. If they claim to be Christian, but do not do what is right, they are not Christian.

**Does what is right** can also mean “practices righteousness.” Understood in this light, “doing good” is not the same thing as righteousness. Something may be good in the eyes of mankind, but not good in the eyes of God. To him, all our “righteous acts are like filthy rags” ([Isa. 64:6](#)). Our righteousness must be motivated by our knowledge that **he is righteous**. Only when our good deeds are done in response to our desire to serve Jesus—only when our acts are an expression and outworking of our faith in him—is God pleased.

[3:1–3](#). The apostle breaks out in spontaneous wonder at the love of God in making us his children. A further wonder grasps him: **that is what we are**. The world does not **know us**, because it does not **know** our father. To “know” in this context has the sense of “accept.” It appears in [John 1:10–11](#): “He was in the world, and ... the world did not *recognize* him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (italics added). The failure to recognize him was based on the fact that they did not accept him. If the world rejects God, it is no surprise that it would reject us, God's children.

Even though we are children of God, we don't grasp the full significance of what it means to be God's children. We now have only a dim perception of who we are and what we will be (**what we will be has not yet been made known**). When we see Jesus, our understanding will expand, and we will see it all. As [2 Corinthians 3:18](#) phrases it, "We ... are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory." This process of transformation, which is slow and uneven here on earth, will be rapid and complete when we see Jesus.

If we begin to understand the unimaginable wonder of this fact, we will want to live pure and holy lives, for we will want to be pure **as he is pure**. Our weak commitment to absolute holiness stems in large measure from our dim perception of who Jesus is and who we have become in him. When we grasp more fully that we are now coheirs with Jesus ([Rom. 8:17](#)), we are destined to rule and reign in heaven with him. Slated for perfect holiness, united in spirit with the Creator-God of the universe, we will no longer want to fiddle around with the "mud pies" of this world. We will prefer the spotless beauty of a banquet table. One of our resources, then, for living a more holy lifestyle is pondering and meditating upon who Jesus is, who we have become in him, and what our life is likely to be when we see him.

## B. God's Children Do Not Live in Sin ([3:3-10](#))

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *The person who lives in sin is of the devil, and the person who does what is righteous is of God.*

[3:4-6](#). The succession of brief statements continues. When scrutinized more carefully, they defy common understanding and lead to disagreement among Bible teachers. I have found no two commentaries that agree on what John meant in these verses. Therefore, if we have a difficult time understanding this passage, we can take some comfort in the fact that everyone seems to find it difficult. Whatever we end up believing, we must hold our opinion graciously, recognizing that other godly, well-taught people hold a differing position.

The opening statement appears obvious: when we sin, we break the law; **in fact, sin is lawlessness**. This is one of a number of biblical definitions of sin. Other biblical definitions of sin include:

- "The schemes of folly are sin" ([Prov. 24:9](#)).
- "Everything that does not come from faith is sin" ([Rom. 14:23](#)).
- "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" ([Jas. 4:17](#)).
- "All wrongdoing is sin" ([1 John 5:17](#)).

The Bible does not give one all-encompassing definition of sin. All these different definitions are facets of the "whole" of sin. This verse emphasizes that sin is **lawlessness**. This lawlessness is characteristic of the spirit of Antichrist. Sinners see no reason to concern themselves with God's laws. Thus, in [2 Thessalonians 2:3-4](#), "the man of lawlessness ... will oppose ... God."

The man of lawlessness does not reign. Sin is not removed from the world by simply creating a theology or philosophy that says we are above sin or incapable of sin. Sin has to be dealt with. God has dealt with our sin. **You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.** Walls, David, and Max Anders. *I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude*. Vol. 11. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999. Print. Holman New Testament Commentary. Page 3. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 2:54 PM April 4, 2019.

Jesus dealt with sin in the only way suitable to God. He lived a sinless life, and then made the ultimate perfect sacrifice. His perfect life became the model, the new creature God wants to make of all his children.

The next statement is breathtaking: **no one who lives in him keeps on sinning**. This statement is followed by an even more absolute statement: **no one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him**. To put a cap on it, verse [9](#) says the person who has been born of God **cannot go on sinning**.

These statements can be alarming to the Bible reader. We know we have sinned. We may be wrestling with sin that keeps cropping up in our lives. If this letter intends to comfort us with the assurance of our salvation ([5:13](#)), statements like these can have just the opposite effect. We must seek further understanding.

Our starting point is obvious: Christians do sin, as acknowledged elsewhere in this letter ([1:8–2:1](#); [5:16–17](#)). Repeated exhortations *not* to sin ([2:1](#), [15](#), [29](#); [3:12](#), [18](#); [5:21](#)) would be needless if we *could* not sin or if we *did* not sin. Bible teachers suggest several different interpretations:

1. *The Willful-Sin Position*. According to this interpretation, the statement is referring to willful, deliberate sins, as opposed to involuntary, unintentional sins and errors.

This interpretation raises three problems. First, even saintly people can commit major, premeditated sins. Second, distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary sins is very difficult. Third, the text gives no indication that such a limited definition of sin is meant. Rather, the text clearly talks about *all* sin.

2. *The Habitual-Sin Position*. According to this view, the text means we cannot adopt a lifestyle of willful, unrepentant sin. The verbs in these sentences are present tense, which means, as the NIV has translated it, don't "keep on sinning." We will sin. We may sin badly, as Peter did—cursing and denying Jesus, or as the Corinthians did—tolerating adultery ([1 Cor. 5:1–12](#)) and committing violations of the Lord's Supper ([1 Cor. 11:23–33](#)). We may go through a spell of "backsliding," as the churches of Asia did ([Rev. 2–3](#)).

But we will never settle down into a lifestyle that is characterized by sin. We will never adopt the extreme lifestyle of the false teachers who had blatant disregard for the standards of holiness set by Jesus. No one who practices the litany of evil deeds in [Galatians 5:19–21](#) will inherit the kingdom of God. Any of these deeds, as individual acts, may be forgiven. But when people have no regard for holiness and claim that they are free to sin—as the antichrists in this letter seem to have done—they have indicated by their own attitude that they are not Christians.

Remember the context. False teachers claimed that Christians do not sin, or cannot sin, or are free to sin, and that if they do sin, it is of no great consequence. It is an extreme situation that calls for extreme language, so Scripture dispels this groundless teaching.

3. *The Ideal-Character Position*. Those who hold this view point out that the text's claim that a Christian does not sin states what ought to be the character of the Christian, not necessarily what is the character of *all* Christians. We ought to strive for the ideal, even if we know we will not reach it. We will be better off by trying and failing than if we had never tried at all. The extreme

situation in the church required hyperbole (deliberate exaggeration) to make the point. The truth might be that you cannot keep from sinning, but the balancing truth is that you ought to try.

4. *The New-Man Position.* According to this view, Scripture teaches that the “new man” is a perfect new creation. In [Ephesians 4:24](#) the apostle Paul says the “new self” is “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” The New American Standard version reads, “And put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.” This is in keeping with the assertions in [Romans 7:15](#): “[What] I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” But (v. [17](#)), “it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.”

Thus we are torn. “In my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members” (vv. [22–23](#)). Paul concludes (v. [25](#)) by saying, “In my mind [I] am a slave to God’s law, but in my [flesh] (NASB) a slave to the law of sin.” (The NIV translates the word *flesh* as “sinful nature.” This is an unfortunate translation. The NASB is more accurate at this point.)

John MacArthur writes clearly about this issue in his commentary on Ephesians:

Biblical terminology does not say that a Christian has two different natures. He has but one nature, the new nature in Christ. The old self dies and the new self lives; they do not coexist.... The Christian is a single new person, a totally new creation, not a spiritual schizophrenic. It is the filthy coat of remaining humanness in which the new creation dwells that continues to hinder and contaminate his living. He is no longer the old man corrupted, but is now the new man created in righteousness and holiness, awaiting full salvation ([Rom. 13:11](#)) when he dies and is given a new body (p. 164).

Zane Hodges writes in a similar vein in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*:

The regenerate life is, in one sense, an essentially and fundamentally sinless life. For the believer, sin is abnormal and unnatural; his whole bent of life is away from sin ... Insofar as God is experienced by a believer, that experience is sinless.

The “new man” (or “new self”; [Eph. 4:24](#); [Col. 3:10](#)) is an absolutely perfect new creation. By insisting on this point, John was seeking to refute a false conception about sin. Sin is not, nor ever can be, anything but satanic. It can never spring from what a Christian truly is at the level of his regenerate being (pp. [894–895](#)).

Because this new self, the inner man, is regenerate, there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus ([Rom. 8:1](#)), in spite of the fact that sin might occur. It remains for our adoption to be completed by receiving a new body ([8:22–23](#)), so that the power of sin will be completely removed from us. Until then, we battle—the regenerate inner self with the flesh. The “flesh” does not refer to the physical body. The body is neutral. Rather, the flesh is a spiritual gravitational pull to sin that we cannot escape until we receive a new body.

This does not answer all questions. In fact, it tells us more than we really understand. The point seems to be that our inner man is regenerate and does not sin. Yet, we are responsible for the sins of our whole

person ([Rom. 6:1-2, 15](#)). Paul says, in essence, "Heaven forbid! How can those of us who have been born again be content to keep presenting the members of our body as instruments to sin? It is inconceivable!"

Perhaps [1 John 3:5](#) applied the same principle: the person born of God does not go on sinning. In the [Romans 7](#) sense, that is true. The inner man, the regenerate self, does not sin. Yet when the "filthy coat of remaining humanness in which the new creation dwells," as MacArthur put it, "continues to hinder and contaminate his living," he participates in the work of the devil. But the **one who is born of God** (inner man) does not sin **because God's seed remains in him**, and he cannot sin because **he has been born of God**.

There are still other positions on this passage. Most are variations of these views. The lack of consensus among Bible teachers about the meaning of this text suggests to me that whatever position we hold, we might hold it gently and without arrogance. There are good people who hold to all these differing views. Perhaps if the truth were known, elements of more than one of them might be true. We must also recognize that the problem in understanding these difficult statements in 1 John is due in large part to the historical and cultural distance that has been created with the passing of nearly two thousand years. John's readers apparently understood what he was saying well enough that he felt no need to explain himself further.

Bible teachers agree what is not said here. [First John 3:6](#) does not say that in his everyday life, the Christian will never commit sin, or that if he does, he will lose his salvation.

[3:7-10](#) This paragraph reiterates three points made in verses [4-6](#). This reiteration is set out skillfully in John Stott's commentary, *The Epistles of John* ([121](#)):

**Verses [4-7](#)**

**Verses [8-10](#)**

The introductory phrase: *whosoever committeth sin (v. [4](#)) he that committeth sin (v. [8](#))*

The theme: *The nature of sin is lawlessness  
The origin of sin is the devil (v. [8](#))  
(v. [4](#))*

The purpose of Christ's appearing: *she was manifested to take away our sins (v. [5](#))  
the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil (v. [8](#))*

The logical conclusion: *"no one who abides in him sins" (v. [6](#), RSV)  
"no one born of God commits sin" (v. [9](#), RSV).*

Seeing this chart will not only help us understand the chapter, but it will also keep us from repeating ourselves excessively in explaining it.

Verse [7](#) warns us not to be led astray. This is probably a warning against the false teachers and antichrists who apparently felt free to sin, while denying that they were doing anything wrong. They could assert their own righteousness in the face of the facts.

Our text counters with the bold assertion that the person who **does what is right is righteous**. This revisits the problem answered in [2:29](#). Doing what is right does not make a person righteous. But the false teachers must recognize that if a person is righteous, he or she will do what is right. You cannot claim to be righteous, as did the antichrists, while living in open sin. It might be amplified to read, “It is the person who does what is right who is righteous, not the antichrists who claim to be righteous but do what is wrong.”

**He who does what is sinful is of the devil** makes it clear that the sinning antichrists were not righteous, but were of the devil. This does not mean that when a Christian sins, he suddenly loses his place as a child of God and takes his place as a child of the devil. Rather, it means that the antichrists—since they claim righteousness while living in sin—are children of the devil.

Christians, who are assured of their salvation throughout the letter, need to hear the parallel implication here. When Christians sin, we are, for the moment, siding with the devil’s cause and ought not to do so. All sin ultimately is satanic in nature because sin originated with the devil. Sin is his consistent practice, and he has been sinning “from the beginning” ([John 8:44](#)). To sin is to take part in the devil’s plan, which automatically sets a person in opposition to God. The reason Jesus came was to destroy the work of the devil. When we cooperate with the devil by sinning, we are opposing Jesus.

Verse [9](#) reiterates the idea first stated in verse [6](#) that the person who is born of God will not sin, and then the verse goes beyond that. A person who experiences the new birth cannot sin. The options that applied to verse [6](#) also apply to verse [9](#). (The translators of the NIV have decided that it should be interpreted as **keeps on sinning** in verse [6](#), and **cannot go on sinning** in verse [9](#), and have translated it accordingly. Not all translators and Bible teachers agree with this translation.)

Sinning is impossible because of God’s indwelling **seed**. The **seed** refers to one of three options: (1) the Word of God, (2) the Holy Spirit, or (3) the regenerate spirit when one is born again. We cannot be sure which of these three possibilities is meant. All three could be true and are taught elsewhere in Scripture. Scripture takes seriously the nature of believers as born-again, Spirit-filled, new creatures in Christ. It will not tolerate any casual attitude toward sin. Sin and salvation are opposites. Wanting to sin is not part of being led by the Spirit or having Christ in us. Refusal to take this warning seriously should call us to reexamine our commitment to Christ.

Christians make themselves known as children of God by doing what is right and by loving their brothers. People prove themselves to be children of the devil when they refuse to do what is right and refuse to love their brothers.

### C. Christians Must Love One Another in Actions and in Truth ([3:11–18](#))

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *Christians must love their brothers. Jesus showed us what this meant: he laid down his life for us. Therefore, we ought to do the same for one another.*

[3:11–15](#). Again we hear the message of love from the beginning of Jesus' ministry ([2:7](#)). Before learning what love is, we read what love is not. We should **not be like Cain**, who murdered his brother, Abel, because Cain's actions were evil, while Abel's were righteous. Abel's righteousness apparently engendered profound resentment—anger great enough to prompt murder. Just as Cain resented Abel's righteousness, so the world will resent our righteousness. As a result, just as Cain hated Abel, so the world will despise Christians. This again counters the claims of the antichrists to be righteous Christians, while manifesting a lack of love and even a hatred toward true Christians.

True Christians, those born of God, have love for their brothers placed in their hearts by the Lord, so that we **know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers**. Loving our brothers does not give us eternal life. God does that through Christ. If we have eternal life, we will manifest it by loving our brothers. We may have difficulty loving some Christians who make it hard to love them, but a fundamental desire to love them will show through our lives. Even Jesus' disciples quarreled among themselves about who would be the greatest among them. That was an unloving thing to do. It did not, however, relegate them to the realm of the unsaved.

Next in the succession of challenging declarations is that **anyone who does not love remains in death**; if anyone hates his brother, he is a murderer; and **no murderer has eternal life in him**. We must again stop to consider what John might have meant by this statement. The options are the same as the previous difficult statements.

1. *The Face-Value View*. This view takes the words at face value. If you hate your brother to the point of being willing to murder him, or if you actually murder him, you are not a Christian. This level of hatred is incompatible with the regenerate life. Does this mean that a person who has killed someone cannot be saved? History, I think, disproves that option.

2. *The Abiding View*. Zane Hodges writes in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* that "it is an illusion to believe that a real Christian is incapable of hatred and murder" (p. [896](#)). He cites the examples of David when he killed Uriah the Hittite and of Peter who warned his Christian readers not to let any of them suffer as a murderer ([1 Pet. 4:15](#)).

The key to this view is the word *abiding* which the NIV does not translate. We could translate more literally, "No murderer **has eternal life** abiding in him." The Christian, as long as he is abiding in Christ—or living in conscious fellowship with Christ—would certainly never murder anyone. If he murders someone, it is because he is not abiding in Christ. In this sense, eternal life and Christ must be seen as synonyms.

Again, we must appeal to the context. All of us can recall times when we have not loved our brothers, or we can think of people we don't like to associate with. As a result, we can conclude that we are not Christians. This would be an overreaction. John writes in a context of extreme contrasts. He does not suggest that we are not Christian if we love imperfectly.

3. *The Continuing-to-Hate View*. The final view of these verses treats hate and murder the same as "sin" in verses [6](#) and [9](#). A Christian might hate or murder someone, but if this happened, he or she would  
Walls, David, and Max Anders. *I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude*. Vol. 11. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999. Print. Holman New Testament Commentary. Page 8. Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 2:54 PM April 4, 2019.



be overcome with remorse. If a person is willing to harbor habitual hate, or have no remorse at murder, that person is not a Christian. No one whose life is characterized by hate or murder can be a Christian.

**3:16–18.** In stark contrast to this unspeakable hatred is Jesus' remarkable love. We can understand what love is by looking at Jesus' example. He laid down his life for us. We ought to be prepared to do the same for one another. While the necessity of laying down our lives for one another is rare, the necessity of helping meet one another's needs is not. The true test of a Christian's love is not his words (loving with **words or tongue**) but his willingness to sacrifice for the sake of his brother ... to love **with actions and in truth**.

## D. Christians Can Have Confidence Before God (**3:19–24**)

**SUPPORTING IDEA:** *When we do not live out our desire to love others perfectly, we should not fear that we are not Christians. God sees our heart, not just our actions, and he knows the truth regarding our salvation. If our heart does not condemn us, we may have fruitfulness in prayer and obedience to him.*

**3:19–21. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth:** This phrase probably looks back to verses **17–18** rather than forward. If so, the apostle is saying that it is by our deeds of **action and in truth** that we know that we belong to the truth. The antichrists may have been teaching that they knew the truth by special, inner insight, even though their lives were models of greed and hatred. John countered this impression by claiming the mark of truth is a lifestyle of high moral character and good deeds growing out of our commitment to Christ.

In our desire to live lives of high moral character and good deeds toward others, we will fail. We will fall short even of our own ideals, let alone God's. When this happens, our **hearts** may **condemn us**. But we can **rest in his presence**, for God **knows everything**. He knows that we believe in Christ, that we strive to love our brothers, and that we regret falling short. God does not look only at the outer facts of imperfect love, but at the inner fact of having been born of God. The human heart is not the final standard. Rather, God is! God's power keeps us secure in him. God's power and steadfastness—not our own—give us security. As Jesus said, "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" ([John 10:29](#)).

**3:21–22.** We may silence our condemning hearts in two ways: (1) by confessing our sin ([1:8](#)) so that we are forgiven and cleansed of all unrighteousness, and (2) by resting in the fact that God knows all things, looking not just at our deeds but at our hearts. Once our hearts no longer condemn us, we can have **confidence before God**. This confidence leads us to fruitfulness in prayer. Characteristically, John states it in absolute terms: **we receive from him anything we ask**.

Some passages of Scripture seem to give assurance that we will receive anything we ask for ([Matt. 7:7–8](#)), but other passages give qualifications to answered prayer. The assurances of answered prayer seem to assume a knowledge of the qualifications. Answers to prayers are predicated on our obedience to God's commands. This same letter introduces the qualification of asking in God's will ([5:14](#)). We must ask in Jesus' name ([John 14:13](#); [16:23](#), [26](#)), and abide in Jesus ([John 15:7](#), [16](#)).

Stott (p. [148](#)) points out that the receiving of answers to prayer is the Christian's habitual experience since the verbs are in the present tense. The conditions, along with the verb tense, suggest that John did not intend to promise a blank check for any and every prayer, but that answered prayer is the ongoing experience of the Christian. Even Jesus' request that the cup of crucifixion pass from him was not answered affirmatively ([Luke 22:42](#)). We should observe, however, that the request was followed by the statement, "Yet not my will, but yours be done."

**3:23–24.** What commands must we obey if we are to be fruitful in prayer? We must believe in Jesus and love one another. These two ideas stem from the same attitude of the heart, and John sees them as one command. To do one is to do the other. Those who obey God's commands live in him, or abide in him. Similarly, [John 15](#) links abiding with obeying ([15:9–10](#)).

The way we can know that he lives in us is **by the Spirit he gave us**. There are several views on this passage.

1. *The Charismatic View.* This view sees reference here to the charismatic gifts, such as gifts of prophecy, healing, etc. (*The NIV Application Commentary*, [171](#)). Since the letter is devoid of other clear references, this seems unlikely.
2. *The Inner Witness View.* This view says the Holy Spirit gives us an inner conviction, an inner assurance that we are true Christians. This also seems unlikely, since this would play into the hands of the antichrists who taught that secret, inner knowledge was the sign of divine enlightenment.
3. *The Life Witness View.* This phrase looks *forward* to what John is going to say—not back to what he has said. First John gives four tests of true Christianity: (1) moral character, (2) love of the brethren, (3) obedience to God's commands, and (4) confession that Jesus is God in the flesh. Immediately after John mentioned the Spirit which God gave us, he launched into a serious warning not to trust just any spirit, but to test the spirits. He suggested a threefold test:
  - Doctrine: **Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God** ([4:2](#)).
  - Love: **Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God** ([4:7](#)).
  - Obedience: **This is love for God: to obey his commands** ([5:3](#)).

The Holy Spirit produces doctrinal purity, love for the brethren, and a spirit of obedience to God's commands. When we see these three things, we can be confident that he lives in us. They are the unmistakable signs of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives.

**MAIN IDEA REVIEW:** *Those who love God must live as he wants them to live. They must not go on sinning; rather, they must love their brothers in Christ not just in words but also in deeds.*

### III. CONCLUSION

## No Means of Retreat

This is a very difficult chapter. Nevertheless, it is an important and valuable record of divine truth, and we must labor to understand it as well as we can. Three subjects found throughout the letter dominate this chapter: (1) anyone who has the hope of seeing Jesus purifies himself, even as Jesus is pure; (2) love one another; and (3) obey God's commands.

This call to committed living is exemplified in the story often told about the Spanish explorer, Cortez. In 1519 he landed at Vera Cruz with a small force of seven hundred men to begin his conquest of Mexico. Legend tells us he purposely set fire to his fleet of eleven ships. Presumably, his men on the shore watched their only means of retreat sink to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. Now they had only one direction to move—forward into the Mexican interior to meet whatever might come their way.

The Bible calls us to this kind of single-mindedness—absolute commitment to authentic Christian belief and behavior.

### PRINCIPLES

- Ongoing, willful sin is incompatible with true Christianity.
- True Christian experience is revealed not just in our beliefs but in our behavior.
- Love for other Christians is a mark of authentic Christianity.
- Obedience to God's commands is a mark of our love for him.

### APPLICATION

- Look forward to the wonderful change that will occur when we see Jesus and become like him. Draw encouragement, motivation, and emotional strength from the hope.
- Because Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil, commit yourself totally to following Jesus and obeying his commands.
- Be willing to help your brother if he is in need and if you have the resources to help him.
- Rest in the fact that even when you do not love others perfectly, God knows your heart, and he does not condemn those who are in Christ.