

Children of God - 1 John 2:12-3:10

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Series: All You Need is Love 1 John

Texts: John 3:3-8; 1 John 2:12-3:10

What do Nero, Martin Luther, Napoleon, Adolf Hitler, Mikhail Gorbachev, Pope Leo X, Pope Francis, in fact every pope, Elon Musk and King Charles have in common? They are the antichrist. Or at least that's what people have said. This is the second in our sermon series on 1 John, and our passage today 1 John 2:12-3:10 talks about the antichrist so I thought I should do some research. So I hopped online to that font of unfiltered knowledge, youtube, to find out who the antichrist is. I've done the research so you don't have to. These are just some of the candidates I came across. I learned things I'd never known. Two American couch warriors told me they had heard that King Charles is seen by many in Israel as the Messiah. It's all over the internet people! Just google it. I also learned that I'm now afraid to go on youtube because of what crazy conspiracy theorist videos are going to come up on my feed because of my recent browsing history.

Trying to identify who the antichrist is has a long history, but you may be surprised to know that the term only comes up 4 times in the Bible, and they are all in John's letters. 3 times in 1 John and once in 2 John. Rather than joining in the speculation, why don't we start with seeing what the Bible actually says here in 1 John chapter 2. In 2.26 he says, "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray." Last week we saw that the aged apostle John is writing from Ephesus to the churches in the area that he has pastored for decades. Here we come to one of the reasons why he wrote the letter - to stop people who he calls false prophets and antichrists from leading them astray. In our verses today, John wants them (and us) to know 2 things. First, you are children of God, so that you keep going as Christians. And second, here is how to spot false prophets, so don't get led astray! He explores these 2 themes by setting up these contrasts.

- Loving God versus Loving the World 2:12-17
- Anti-christs versus anointed 2:18-2:27
- Children of God versus children of the devil 2:28-3:10.

So let's have a look together.

Loving God v Loving the World 2:12-17

John steps out of the main flow of the letter in verses 12-14 with a 2 stanza poem. He addresses his readers as children, fathers and young men. We don't have time to explore why he uses this gendered language, but his main point is to convey to his readers who we are in Christ. We are

those who have been forgiven in his name. We are those who know the one who is from the beginning, that is the Father, who we know through his eternal Son, through whom he made all things. We are those who have overcome the evil one. This is not something we do in ourselves. Rather we participate in Jesus' victory over the evil one. Our strength comes from the Word of God in us. All of this is who we are God's children in Christ.¹

In verse 15-17 John turns from our identity in Christ to how to keep going as a Christian. Or to put it another way, we are to resist all that would pull us away from God. Again it's one of those black and white contrasts that John loves.

15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. **16** For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world. **17** The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives for ever.

John here identifies our great enemies - the world, the flesh, and the devil. By the world, John doesn't mean creation which we're called to love, but rather the world as human systems and cultures set in rebellion and opposition to God and his ways. This is that temptation to simply go along with the crowd, with the values and preferences of those around us, rather than to let God's word shape what we love and how we live. We know this when it comes to biblical sexual ethics in our culture which worships at the feet of Aphrodite. But it can come in all shapes and sizes, like a workplace culture of coverup and bullying, a friendship culture of over-indulgence, a sporting club culture of gossip.

The flesh is our own selfish inner tendency to sin and turn away from God and break his laws. John highlights the lust of the flesh and the eyes. The word lust there is literally "over-desire". It's not that desire itself is wrong, rather it's that our desires are dis-ordered. We want the wrong things or we want the right things in the wrong way. Here it's that temptation that enters through our eyes, like Eve seeing the forbidden fruit as "pleasing to the eye" or David eyeing the naked Bathsheba bathing, and wanting her for himself. It's breaking the 10th commandment, "do not covet", the desire to possess what you don't have. The phrase "pride of life" refers to boasting in what you do have - your possessions or accomplishments.

The devil is that spiritual being who rules in this world, seeking to turn us against God and destroy us. In naming him, John strips back the veil to the spiritual reality that lies behind the world and the flesh.

So we do battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. Loving God means we resist their pull away from him. In verse 17 John invites us to consider our lives in light of eternity. We resist the

¹ Cf. 1 John 5.5, 3.4

world, the flesh and the devil because they will not last. So we pursue what endures, God and doing his will.

Anti-Christ v Anointed 2.18-27

John now turns from persevering in Christ to combat those who would lead us astray from him.

Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.

Notice here that John says that there isn't one antichrist, so much as many antichrists. The prefix *anti* can mean "instead of" or "against". John says that they have gone out from the church, instead of remaining in it, which is one way that shows they in the end did not belong. The key test that he gives by which we can discern these antichrists is this: do they deny that Jesus is the Christ? So we read in verse 22-23

Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist – denying the Father and the Son. **23** No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

It's clear that what John means is that these people are *anti* Christ. That is, they are against Christ. They deny that Jesus is God come in the flesh. John echoes Jesus' own words recorded in his Gospel, "whoever does not honour the Son, does not honour the Father, who sent him," and "if you knew me, you would know my Father as well."² John is crystal clear here. The Son and the Father are a package deal. You can't have one without the other. In fact you can only come to the Father through the Son. The Christian faith is universal. It is for everyone, regardless of ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, education, ability whatever. But it is also scandalously particular. All are welcome, all can come to the Father, but only and always through the Son. Deny this, and you're against Christ, and all his atoning work on the cross, the universal forgiveness that he offers, the love that he embodies. That is because you dishonour him and his work.

Just as an aside, for Christians to believe in the uniqueness of Christ does not make us intolerant or judgemental people. That is a false equivalence. Indeed Jesus teaches us to love one another, to love our neighbours, to love even our enemies. When we fail at that, we fail to live the way Jesus calls us to. In fact it's precisely because we believe that Jesus is the one true God come in the flesh to die for his enemies, that we're called to love even as he first loved us.

So antichrists are not so much some big end of days bad guy, as much as those who are against Christ, who deny his incarnation. If you meet people who teach that sort of thing, John says, don't let them lead you astray. This by the way is why we say the creed each week. It's a shield, to

² John 5.23, 8.19

help ground us in the central truths of the faith, and also to guard us against those who would deny Christ. Whether it's cults like the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, or people within the church who question the Incarnation in their teaching, or when engaging with other faiths, the question always comes back to what do you believe about Jesus.

By contrast John says, you have received an anointing from the Holy One. What John means by this is the gift of the Holy Spirit, whom the Father has poured out on all who believe in Christ. So verse 27,

As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him.

Here again John's words reflect Jesus' own that he records in his Gospel in chapter 14-17. Jesus' promises the Father will give the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth who will guide you into all truth. The central truth in which we are to remain, is who Jesus is - the Son of the Father.

Children of God v Children of the devil 2.28-3.10

In this final section John sets up another clear contrast: Children of God versus children of the devil. He begins with one of the most glorious affirmations in the Bible of who we are in Christ in chapter 3.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. **2** Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. **3** All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

It is a great tragedy when a child grows up unsure of their parents' love. Instead of feeling grounded, affirmed, valued as a loved child, the unloved child can take into adult life a sense of insecurity, unsure they are worthwhile, lacking in confidence, struggling to maintain healthy relationships.³ Whatever your earthly parents have been like, John wants you to know in your very bones that you have a Father in heaven who has lavished his love upon you. He has made you his child by sending his Son to die for you and giving you his own Spirit. This is who we really are! The more you let this truth sink in your hearts, the more you look to Jesus and find yourself in him, the less anxious, the more secure, humble and confident you will be.

John reminds us that a world that doesn't recognise Jesus for who he is may not recognise us either. But that's ok. We're known and loved by God. And just as Christ will one day be revealed, so when he returns, we will be made like him. In Philippians Paul says that he will transform our

³ This application is taken from Constantine Campbell, *1,2&3 John, The Story of God Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 2017: 111

lowly bodies so that they may be like his glorious, resurrected body. Anybody who feels the aches and pains of ageing can tell you that is something to hope for! The hope of the bodily resurrection is great news for all of us who at times don't feel at all at home in our bodies. And it's great news for all of us who feel the weakness of the flesh and are frustrated with sin, especially when we fail.

As children of God, we're called to bear the family likeness. We will see Christ, so we're called to purify ourselves just as he is pure. John continues,

But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.

6 No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

This is not to say that we won't sin. John has already made clear back in chapter 1 that we all sin. Rather, our disposition has changed. Sin he says is lawlessness, it's opposition to God. That is not who we are now as God's children. In fact, he goes on to say in verse 9,

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.

That seed is the promised Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. He gives us a new desire to love God as our Father, and obey him.

The contrast to being a child of God is being a child of the devil. Verse 8:

The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning.

It's a confronting thought that is meant to jolt us awake. We have a choice to make. Do we follow Christ, or the evil one? Do we love the Father or the world? Do we walk in the light or the darkness? Do we pursue the truth or go for the lie? But the good news is this,

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. (8)

And so in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit whom God has given us, we can choose the good, and do what is right, living the life God calls us to, confident in his love.