

1 John 2:28-3:1a

Verse 2:28

In verse 28, John transitions to talk encourage the true Christians amongst his readership to faithfully live the Christian life. He says, “So now, little children, remain in Him so that when He appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming” (1 John 2:28). Notice the apostle’s term of address. He intentionally directs his words to “little children.” The Greek was used of very small children in the first century.¹ It should not be thought that John’s words are intended for the youngsters in the churches of Asia Minor. Instead, he uses the word figuratively as an affectionate term of address for believers. He was probably mimicking our Lord who used in John 13:33 to speak to His disciples. John uses the word this way on six other occasions in his first letter (1 John 2:1, 12, and 18; 3:7 and 18; 4:4; and 5:21). He likely employs it in our current text in order to make it clear to whom his words are addressed. He wants everyone to know that his message in this portion of his letter is intended for the real Christians in the churches, not the gnostics. Because of the division and deception being generated by the heretics, the genuine believers needed encouragement.

In particular, they needed exhortation to “remain in” Christ. John’s command contains the same instruction he gave back in verse 24. The apostle is concerned that his readers maintain an abiding relationship with the Lord. The word translated “remain” is a present imperative in the original language of the text. As a result, it could be translated “keep on abiding in Him.”² John’s verbiage describes the fundamental essence of the Christian life. Contrary to the productivity and performance-driven mindset of twenty first-century American Christianity, biblical spirituality is not primarily about doing things for God. Being is more important than doing. Indeed, true Christians will certainly do things for God. Jesus stressed the importance of outward obedience (John 8:47 and 51). However, doing flows from being for the disciple who is truly walking with the Lord. This was the point of Jesus’ vine metaphor. He said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me” (John 15:5).

If we want to truly live the Christ life, we must learn the secret of the vine. We can’t place doing before being. Our priority must first be on an abiding relationship with the Lord. By centering our priorities on Him, engaging in personal worship, employing spiritual disciplines, and learning how to stay in an attitude of prayer, we can experience a real connection with Him that produces spiritual transformation. By staying in a dynamic relationship with Him, we will naturally do the things He wants us to do.

John sought to motivate his readers to pursue such a relationship by reminding them of the future judgment. He said, “So that when He appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming” (1 John 2:28). The original language underlying the phrase “so that” contains a purpose statement. John is giving a reason for his appeal for readers to remain in Jesus.³ His reason is rooted in the Second Coming of Christ.

This event is seen in the word “appears.” The Greek contains a word that simply means “to make known.”⁴ Used in the passive tense, as it is in our passage, it should be translated “to appear.”⁵ Back in 1 John 1:2, the apostle used it in reference to Jesus’ First Advent. Here, it seems he is using it in regard to the Second Advent, as Peter did in 1 Peter 5:4, and as Paul did in Colossians 3:4. One has said that this is “a clear reference to the

¹ Zodhiates, 1370.

² Robertson, 219.

³ Robertson, 219.

⁴ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 396.

⁵ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 396.

second coming of Christ at any time.”⁶ Christ will one day appear again. When He does, “every eye will see Him” (Revelation 1:7). John wanted his readers to be spiritually motivated by this truth.

If believers aren’t in the habit of anticipating the Lord’s return, they’ll likely not be as keen on abiding in Jesus. John says such a lackadaisical spirituality may result in a lack of “confidence” at Christ’s return. The word translated “confidence” is an interesting one in the original language. It was a word borrowed from the political arena of the first century. It described one who was driven by boldness, frankness, and liberty in public speaking.⁷ The New Testament actually uses the word in this way in Acts 4:13. One has described the disposition as involving “an attitude of openness that stems from freedom and lack of fear.”⁸ The Hellenistic philosopher Philo used the word in reference to a servant who had confidence to address his master freely and openly.⁹

As believers, we have a right to such boldness through Christ (Ephesians 3:12). As a result, we should live in light of it. Our lives ought to be characterized by a close walk with the Lord that results in a secure state of the mind. When He returns, we have the capacity to stand boldly before Him, knowing our sins are forgiven and our consciences are clean. Paul himself prayed for such courage in the face of death (Philippians 1:20). In our current text, John encourages believers to remain in Jesus so that they might possess it at the return of Christ.

The apostle also wanted his readers to learn the secret of remaining so that they wouldn’t be “ashamed” when Christ returned. The original language of the text conjures up imagery of shame and embarrassment.¹⁰ Used in the passive voice within the context of our passage, the word depicts a person being remorseful at the last judgment because of his or her lifestyle. The Septuagint employs the same language in Jeremiah 22:2 to speak of the emotions associated with Divine wrath. John wants his readers to avoid the fate of the ungodly. He wants them to pursue a meaningful and close relationship with the Lord so that they might be free of fear when the Lord returns.

We know that John’s words deal with the return of Christ, because he utilizes the word translated “coming” at the end of the verse. The Greek seems to involve a play on words. The term rendered “coming” (*parousía*) is very close to the one rendered “confidence” (*parrēsía*). It literally means “presence.”¹¹ However, it is used throughout the New Testament as a technical term for the Second Coming (Matthew 24:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 2:8; James 5:7; and 2 Peter 3:12). John wanted the real Christians in Asia Minor to know that they had no need to shrink back in guilt-ridden fear at Jesus’ return.¹² They did not need to engage in the low-living of the gnostic heretics. The solution was for them to “remain” in Jesus.

Through an abiding relationship with Christ, we have all that we need for life and godliness. He is the vine, and we are the branches. When we stay centered in Him, His life will flow through us. We simply need to stay focused on “being,” and the “doing” of the Christian life will take care of itself. To stay motivated in this regard, it is always helpful to keep our eyes on the end of human history. An ever-present focus on the Second Coming can prompt us to stay spiritually grounded. We will be more likely to remain in Christ if we stay cognizant of the

⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 595.

⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 595.

⁸ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 302.

⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 595.

¹⁰ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 38.

¹¹ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 302.

¹² Robertson, 219.

return of Christ. An awareness that He will soon hold us accountable for our attitudes and actions can do a lot to stoke the fires of devotion in our souls (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Verse 2:29

In verse 29, John speaks of how true faith will result in obedience to Christ's commands. The topic of the verse is an ever-present theme in his letter (1 John 1:6 and 2:3). On this occasion, he says, "If you know that He is righteous, you know this as well: Everyone who does what is right has been born of Him" (1 John 2:29). The pronoun "He" at the beginning of the verse refers to Jesus, the one who was mentioned at the end of the previous verse.

John indicates that his readers knew that the Lord was righteous. This was a hot topic amongst the apostle's readership. The heretics minimized the nature of Jesus. They regarded Him as one of many beings in a long line of angelic epiphanies. John sought to restore an apostolic Christology in the church.

The word translated "righteous" was used of people or things that were morally upright or ethical.¹³ In regard to Jesus, the term depicted our Lord as being just and innocent. According to Scripture, Jesus was absolutely perfect in both a moral and ethical sense. He never said, thought, or did anything that fell short of God's standard of perfection. When He stood on trial to be condemned by men, both Pilate's wife (Matthew 27:19) and Pilate (Matthew 27:24) remarked on the impeccable character of our Lord. During the crucifixion at Golgotha, a Roman centurion did something similar (Luke 23:47).

Given Scripture's attestation to the holiness of Jesus, it seems unthinkable that the gnostics would cast aspersions on His character. Surely they had heard of the witness of Pilate and the others. In addition, they had heard the teaching of the apostles. Peter had proclaimed, "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18). Despite the claims of the heretics, Jesus was 100% God and 100% man, and He lived a flawless life on behalf of all of humanity. John echoed this truth elsewhere in his letter. He asserted the holiness of Jesus in 1 John 1:9. In 1 John 2:1, he flatly called our Lord "Jesus Christ the righteous one."

According to John, his readers had come to "know" that Jesus had a spotless character. The word translated "know" in our text is a perfect tense verb. It implies a past event with abiding results. The apostle means to point back to the church's previous spiritual learning. He does so to remind them of what was really true. Because of the threat of false teaching, John's readers needed to be reminded of many of the rudimentary doctrines of the Christian faith. He has used this tactic elsewhere in his epistle (1:1 and 2:7, 18, and 24) to awaken spiritual senses. As a result of what they had come to "know," the church should have been living with a continual knowledge concerning the truth. In this instance, the believers in Asia Minor needed to remember that Jesus was sinless.

The gnostic's skewed Christology had led them to embrace a skewed hamartiology. They gave permission for their followers to engage in grossly immoral acts, despite the teaching of God's Word. John reminds his readers, "you know this as well — everyone who does what is right has been born of Him" (1 John 2:29). The word "know" appears for a second time in our current verse. The underlying Greek contains a different word for knowledge than the one used in the first part of verse 29. Interestingly, the term here is the one from which the gnostics got their title. John uses it in the present tense, indicating that his readers should have had an ongoing knowledge of God's truth concerning the believer's need for personal righteousness.

The word translated "righteousness" is a cognate of the one translated "righteous" at the beginning of our current verse. It refers to "the right behavior God requires."¹⁴ It involves

¹³ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

¹⁴ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

the act of fulfilling the righteous character of God. John claims that those who embody such righteousness give evidence that they have been “born” of God.

The word translated “born” was used in the ancient world to speak of literal, physical birth (John 9:19). It is used here to speak of spiritual birth. Jesus Himself popularized the term as a synonym for conversion (John 3:3-8). In John 3:3, He said, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” John will speak of this birth later in His letter (1 John 3:9; 4:7; and 5:1, 4, and 18). In 1 John 5:1, he will show that such a birth takes place at the moment of faith: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.” In our current verse, the apostle uses a perfect tense verb to convey the idea that regeneration should have abiding results. He also uses the passive mood to show that the new birth is only accomplished by the Lord.

For John, if one is truly born of God, he or she will live a life that reflects God’s character. A child normally does bear a resemblance to his or her parents. John took issue with the heretics who claimed to know God (1 John 2:4) while having no family resemblance to Jesus. Righteousness is proof that one has been born again, not simple jangling boasts of faith.

The false teachers in Asia Minor were professional professors of faith. They made many claims concerning godliness and spiritual enlightenment. They talked a good game. It is for this reason that they were so quotable. John had no problem reciting what they said, because they were known for their verbose boasts. They had popularized many a slew of catchy clichés, proud professions, and spiritual slogans. The apostle often quoted his opponents with his “if we say” phrase (1 John 1:6, 8, and 10 and 2:4, 6, and 9). The gnostics were all talk, but they didn’t have the right type of walk. They said the right things, but they flagrantly embraced lives of sin (1 John 1:6).

John wanted the church to know that truly regenerated people will reflect the righteousness of Christ. His teaching was in alignment with the rest of Scripture. Jesus Himself taught that mere claims of conversion will matter little if they aren’t accompanied by a transformed life. In His famous Sermon on the Mount, He proclaimed: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Paul affirmed the teaching of our Lord, asserting that true salvation will lead result in a sanctified lifestyle (Ephesians 2:10). James used a metaphor from human anatomy to make the same point: “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Though good works are not a requirement for salvation, they are certainly a result of salvation. John’s readers needed to be reminded of such truth. The immoral heretics were not real Christians.

John’s words in verse 29 stand as an admonition for all generations. The Church must be on guard against vain professions. Those who confess Christ should examine themselves to see if they have character that matches their confession. They should regularly analyze their lives to make sure they don’t have a profession that is devoid of practice. In a world in which talk is often cheap, may the Church be diligent to place more weight on actions than words. Let’s remember an actualized faith is what counts, not mere aspirations or acclamations of faith.

3:1a

John begins chapter three by reminding his readers of the family-like standing they possess in Christ. He says, “See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God’s children—and we are!” (1 John 3:1a). The verse begins with a Greek word translated “see.” The English masks the full meaning of the term. In the original language, John uses a strong word in the imperative mood. It is designed to arouse attention.¹⁵ The apostle wants his readers to stand in amazement at the wonderful love of God.

¹⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 595.

In addition, he uses another word that is intended to provide greater emphasis on God's love. The Koine Greek of verse one utilizes a term that is translated "what great" in the English translation above. It is an adjective in the Greek that serves as a powerful exclamation. It is intended to express admiration. It means "how great" or "how wonderful!"¹⁶ In Roman times, the word was originally an interrogative that meant "of what country" or "of what race."¹⁷ It implied astonishment at some new thing that had previously been unseen. One has said it often meant "Where did you get that?"¹⁸ The word could be thought of as being similar to our modern expression wherein we say something similar to "What in the world is that?"

John uses the language in view to express great admiration for the otherworldly benevolence that has been bestowed upon God's people. He wanted his readers to know about the "great love the Father has given us." The word translated "given" was one that was used of an unearned or undeserved gift.¹⁹ Indeed the love of God towards man was initiated by God Himself. Later in his letter, John will say, "Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). In our current verse, John speaks of the gift of God's love by using a perfect tense verb. It depicts the Lord's gracious charity as being permanent and abiding.²⁰ Once one has been cherished by God, he or she will never be expelled from God's presence.

The Lord's love is seen in the fact "that we should be called God's children." John uses the ideal father/child relationship as a metaphor for the love the Lord has for the redeemed. It may be hard for us in the Western world to fully understand the meaning of his comparison. We often take it for granted that children should be loved by their fathers. In the ancient world, things were different. At the time of John's writing, it was considered a great privilege if one had a father who was kind and loving.²¹ The heads of the households were often cruel, and they usually had harsh and unrelenting expectations of those within the family.

John means to demonstrate what a remarkable type of relationship we have with God. He says we have been "called God's children." The word translated "called" is used elsewhere in the New Testament to speak of the literal naming of a child (Matthew 2:23). Here, the term is used to speak of the way in which the Lord adopts a certain spiritual perspective towards the redeemed. At salvation, an individual is adopted into God's family (Ephesians 1:5), and the Lord applies a new name to those who are His (Revelation 2:17). His epithet or appellation for the elect is "my children."²² The verbiage of our text is passive tense. Scholars often regard such verb usage as a "theological passive." John means to portray the Lord as performing the act of naming on His people. No one can earn the name "child." Paul spoke of the way in which God has given us a name in Romans 9:26. James spoke of how the Lord named Abraham in James 2:23.

The designation "children" was often used by Jews in Jesus' day as a moniker for the descendants of Abraham (John 11:52). Such usage was drawn from the prophets. Hosea used the term of Israel (Hosea 11:1). John christianizes the title and applies it to the Church. It is a meaningful designation. It expresses the immenseness of God's love towards His people. Just as a healthy, ideal father would go to the ends of the earth to meet the needs of his

¹⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 324.

¹⁷ Robertson, 220.

¹⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 595.

¹⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 595.

²⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 595.

²¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 595.

²² Zodhiates, 812.

children, the Lord has lavished an endless and unconditional love out upon His people. Sure, there are earthly fathers who don't love as they ought. Their failure should not cause us to lose sight of the comparison at hand. The exemplary father has a holy and healthy love for his children. In most cases, he would die for them. We are all aware that such love is the ideal in parenting, and this ideal serves as an example of God's love for us.

The rest of the New Testament confirms this doctrine. In his gospel writing, John proclaimed that Jesus' work on our behalf makes us children of God: "But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name" (John 1:12). He'll use the same term translated "children" later in his epistle to similarly talk about the blessed standing believers enjoy (1 John 3:2 and 10 and 5:2) In Romans, Paul declares, "The Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children, and if children, also heirs—heirs of God and coheirs with Christ—if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:16-17). In Ephesians, Paul flatly calls us "God's dearly beloved children" (Ephesians 5:1). Jesus spoke on this topic. He assured His disciples that they were the recipients of a father-like love in His Sermon on the Mount. They only needed faith to trust in such love (Matthew 7:7-11). The Bible shouts loud and clear — we are loved by God and we belong to Him!

To experience the peace and power that belongs to Christ-followers, one must develop an abiding trust in the Father's love. We are often like Jesus' first disciples. We are sometimes tempted to doubt His care for us. Sometimes our past experiences entice us to believe lies about God. Because of a failure, we assume that He's mad at us. Other times, we can let another person's estimation of us pervert our view of God. A demanding boss, an abusive parent, or demeaning authority figure may make us believe that God acts similarly. Some people struggle throughout life because they were hardwired with negative views of God from a young age. No matter what you've experienced, and regardless of how you have been taught, know this — God loves you with a holy, paternal type of love. There is nothing you can do to make Him disown you. Trust in His love! Believe that you are His child!