

## **Are you Sure?: Grace, Truth or Neither?**

1 John 2:28-3:10

November 27, 2022

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Somewhere along the journey of consuming funny cat videos, YouTube decided that I needed to watch political debates. Of course not the whole debate, but 13 second clips of debates where there is no context or comeback, it's all mic drops and truth bombs.

Mic drops and truth bombs. That's what sells. The algorithm knows that once I've watched one my dopamine will peak as all my preconceived biases get validated, and then I'll be ready to endure another ad to watch another clip. And It's so appealing.

I mean there's just nothing better than watching someone I disagree with get totally dismantled. Their argument doesn't just get dealt with, but they are shown to be a bumbling imbecile for even daring to hold a perspective different from my own.

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Good morning, and welcome again to Fort George. And welcome to those of you who are watching online. My name is Dan, and after that confession, you will be happy to find out I'm one of the pastors here. If you've been with us over the last couple months, you will know that we have been walking section by section through 1<sup>st</sup> John. It's a small book at the end of the Bible that focuses on providing Jesus followers with the ability to know that they know Jesus.

So if you've got a Bible handy please open it up to 1<sup>st</sup> John 2 starting in verse 28. Would you stand with me. Hear now the word of the Lord:

[Read 1 John 2:28-3:10]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Does anyone know Canadian comedian Russel Peters? He tells a story about a time when he, an Indo Canadian, was attempting to buy a handbag from a Chinese Canadian at a kiosk in the mall. Of course, being a pasty white guy, I can't tell you the story. But the punch line was "Be a man. Do the right thing." Great clip. And that's where John is going today. This passage is about doing the right thing.

And verse 10, gives us the outline of what this passage is about: John tells us children of God are people who do the right thing. But what is the right thing? And what happens if we don't do the right thing? Do we stop being children of God? John's going to unpack that today. So let's start at the beginning with being children of God.

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So in chapter 1 John starts using this idea calling his readers "My dear children", but now in chapter 3 he says:

See how very much our Father loves us, for He calls us His children, and that is what we are! (1 John 2:1)

So John is talking to Jesus followers – to saved people – and the reason we are saved is because the Father has lavished His love on us by adopting us into His family. The Father calls everyone who puts their faith in Jesus, His children. And this is really important because of where he is going. You see the question John is dealing with is what do people who have come to faith in Jesus do with their own sinfulness? Or put another way, how do we deal with the conflict between the reality of our new birth in Jesus, on one hand, and our ongoing sin on the other?

And John cares about this. 1<sup>st</sup> John, probably more than any other book in the Bible, is designed to help us navigate this tricky topic. John wants Jesus followers to be sure that they are saved – sure that they are God’s children. But notice how he ties these two ideas together. In 2:28, he says:

And now, dear children, continue in Him, so that when He appears we may be confident and unashamed before Him at His coming. (1 John 2:28)

So John says Jesus is coming back, and we want to be confident and unashamed before Him in that moment. He’s going to show up and we aren’t going to want to be wondering “Oh man, I totally knew He was coming. But I’m not ready. Like, I know I haven’t been living like He wants me to live. I wonder if I’m in.”

Now lots of church attenders live here. We know what we should be doing, but we aren’t doing it. And the result is that we steal the joy and confidence of our assurance that we are God’s children from ourselves. It’s the worst of both worlds. You aren’t enjoying the sin you are giving yourselves to because you are full of guilt, and you don’t have the joy of knowing you are God’s child. Don’t live here. This is a bad spot.

And so instead John says “continue in Him.” This is the alternative to believing some right stuff about Jesus but not living it out. To continue in Jesus is what a child of God does. And Jesus was constantly telling stories about how important it is to continue.

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So once Jesus told a story about a wedding. Now Canadian weddings start when the Bride shows up. And usually she arrives on time, though once I officiated an outdoor wedding, in the blistering heat of August, where the bride showed up 45 minutes late. And there was no water or bathrooms. People were drooping and women were hiking off into the trees in their dresses.

But that kind of waiting is nothing compared to the way weddings worked in the first century. You see they didn’t set a wedding day or time at all. So a couple would get engaged, and an engagement would last about a year. And during this time the groom would go and prepare a place for his bride to live. And if they were young and poor it would probably be a room built onto the side of the groom’s father’s house.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Contextual information adapted from <https://free.messianicbible.com/feature/ancient-jewish-wedding-customs-and-yeshuas-second-coming/> (Accessed November 26, 2022)

And during this time the bride would focus on preparing for the wedding. She would get her wedding garments in order along with decorations like lamps. And she knew the groom would come in about a year or so, but she did not know the day or the hour. In fact, even the groom wouldn't know the day or hour because ultimately, he wasn't allowed to bring his bride home until his father told him the house was ready.

And so the bride would keep her oil lamps lit at all times so she could be ready day and night. Now as the day would grow closer there would be signs that they were in the last days of the betrothal. Rumors would spread about how close the house was to completion. And so the bride would gather her bridesmaids and they would all be vigilant. But still they would not know the day or the hour.

And then, without warning, the shofar or trumpet would sound, and the groom would show up. And the bride and her party would trim their lamps and join him outside. And he would lead the bridal procession back to the home he had prepared for her.

Any of that sound familiar? Jesus used the wedding to illustrate His return. And in His story there were 10 bridesmaids waiting for the groom<sup>2</sup> – 5 were wise and brought extra oil, and 5 were foolish. And the groom was a long time in coming and so everyone fell asleep. But at midnight the cry went out that he was on his way.

And so everyone trimmed their lamps, but the foolish 5 realized their lamps were going out. And so they needed to go buy more oil. The wise 5 couldn't lend any of theirs or all the lamps would go out.

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But while they were gone, the groom arrived, and took the 5 who were ready into the wedding banquet and shut the door. And Jesus ends the story saying:

Later, when the other five bridesmaids returned, they stood outside, calling, 'Lord! Lord! Open the door for us!'

"But he called back, 'Believe me, I don't know you!'

"So you, too, must keep watch! For you do not know the day or hour of My return. (Matthew 25:11-13)

Jesus says His children live ready for His return. In fact this is so important that it's only the people who live ready who are His children and His bride.

And John is saying the same thing. He says dear children continue in Jesus so that when He appears we may be confident and unashamed. The assurance of salvation that Jesus wants for us is tied to our living ready for His return. But what does it mean to live ready for Jesus' return? Look at 3 verse 2. John says:

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 25:1-13

Dear friends, we are already God's children, but He has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He really is. And all who have this eager expectation will keep themselves pure, just as He is pure. (1 John 3:2-3)

John says God's children have a different perspective than other people have; they live with their eyes on eternity. They have an eager expectation for Jesus' return, and it impacts the way they live – it makes them pure; it makes them strange to the world. Faith means living in a way that doesn't make sense in the world.

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When I was 19, I met a man named Todd Atkinson who had a faith like I had never seen before. He didn't just believe in Jesus; Jesus was making a difference in his life.

So Todd had graduated recently and owed \$30,000 in student loans. And this was a huge number, it was the 90's. And he and his wife were poor. They were just scraping by. But they were praying in faith and continually God was providing for them. Todd had all sorts of stories of Jesus showing up in the midst of their need.

And then one day something interesting happened. A guy Todd didn't even know well told him that God had directed him to give Todd \$30,000 and he didn't even know about Todd's loans. He didn't know, but someone did.

And so Todd accepted the money, and then he and his wife prayed about it, and they decided that instead of paying off their loans they would give the money away. What!? Foolishness! It makes no sense! But the reason they did this was because they wanted to live in the spot where they would get to see God's provision on a daily basis.

You see their eyes were on eternity. They weren't going to live 80 years and then die; they were going to live forever. And so they wanted to put themselves in a spot where they continually needed God's provision.

Now just as an aside, do you think God was up in heaven slapping His head and saying "Ahhh man, I gave you that money to pay your debt. Do you think it's easy finding someone willing to give away \$30,000? How am I supposed to provide for you now?" No. That's a perspective that thinks this life is all there is. That's not faith. And guess what? Todd's a pastor today and hasn't starved to death. Faith is living in a way doesn't make sense if this life is all there is but makes complete sense if we are going to continue living forever.

And "continuing with Jesus starts now. It means living today knowing that we are going to live forever. And so we do things today, not that make sense for retirement, but that make sense for eternity. And John says people who live like this know that they know Jesus.

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So how do we live in a way that doesn't make sense to the world? Here is where this gets practical. In verse 10 John sums up everything he has said to date. He says:

So now we can tell who are children of God and who are children of the devil. Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God. (1 John 3:10)

John says God's children do what God says and they love God's people. And this is what separates us from the world.

Now our world is polarized today like never before. We have people who lean left and people who lean right. And it feels like there isn't much room in the middle. And that's because the world trains us to see the people who lean the other way as not only stupid, but evil.

So people on the right care about virtue. And virtue for the right is truth. So they value tradition because the rules it contains have guided people into living right. They know rules like "if you don't work you don't eat", and "don't kill" have made societies great. And so they work hard to follow the rules and take care of themselves and their families.

The problem though is that people on the right have a hard time giving grace to people who don't measure up. They've got truth without grace. And so when they bump into people who don't submit to the truth like they do they are quick to point out that the reason things are going badly for them is because they aren't following the rules. They look down on those who aren't as good as them.

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Interestingly, people on the left care about virtue as well. But virtue for the left is grace. So liberals value minorities. They hate injustice and inequality. They despise racism and expose abusers. And liberals work hard to fight oppressive systems that trap people in poverty and shame.

The problem though is that people on the left have a system built up around grace without truth. Everyone's ideas are equally valid and so everyone gets to present their own standard of what is right and what is wrong. And the result is that it's really easy to find fault in what other people are doing, but it's really hard to say what is right because everyone has their own standard.

Truth without grace. Grace without truth. These are the positions that make sense to the world. But John says truth without grace isn't really truth. And grace without truth isn't really grace. It's like a narrow road with two ditches. And you can fall into the truth ditch where you might be right but you are destroying people along the way. Or you can fall into the grace ditch where there is no standard at all and nowhere to lead people.

And without Jesus you cannot see a third option, but the Bible give one. It says:

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Jesus is full of grace and truth. So once Jesus was teaching at the temple when some Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery and made her stand before the group.

Imagine the scenario. This group of powerful men all clothed in religious garb. They are respected and in control. And this woman is in quite a different place. Men and women weren't equal in the first century, and this woman found herself at the very short end of the stick – caught in the act of adultery. And like the Pharisees say, the law stipulated that the penalty for adultery was death by stoning.

Now to be caught in the act of adultery would require the involvement of a man, but you probably noticed he isn't in this story. And that's because he's on the longer end of the stick. Life wasn't fair in the first century – and it's still not fair. But that's not the point of the story. You see the Pharisees don't care about the woman or the man at all. They have another purpose. And so they throw the woman down in front of Jesus and say:

"Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do You say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing Him. (John 8:4-6)

This is the very definition of truth without grace. The Pharisees are right. They know the truth, and they have found someone breaking it. But they also know something else; they know Jesus loves people and isn't going to want to stone this woman. But He also claims to be a man of God.

And so the choice they give Jesus is truth or grace. What is it going to be Jesus? Are You going to side with what God says and help kill this woman? Or are You going to let her off and prove that You aren't a man of God at all?

It's a truth bomb. Mic drop. There is no comeback. There is no way out. Jesus is dammed if He does and dammed if He doesn't. And that's what they want. They want to destroy Jesus. And this is where our world lives. You can lean left, or you can lean right. You can do truth or you can do grace. But what the world has no category for is who Jesus actually is. Jesus is full of grace and truth. He will not fall into either ditch; He holds them both together.

And so Jesus bends down and writes something in the sand. We can only speculate what that was, but what we know was that in this moment He was down on the ground with the woman – He's beside her in the dirt. He sides Himself with the vulnerable and opposes the oppressor. And then, when the Pharisees keep pressing Him for an answer, He stands up and says:

"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:7)

Jesus meets the truth of their accusation with truth and it undresses them. And beginning with the oldest, every one of the accusers put down his rock and went away until only Jesus was left with the woman. There is only one person in the room worthy of throwing the first stone. And it's Jesus. And that's when we get the final exchange. Jesus turns to the woman and asks:

Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:10-11)

Jesus offers neither truth without grace or grace without truth. Jesus offers grace and truth. She has sinned – sin is a real thing. There really is a standard, and there really are consequences for breaking it. And Jesus calls her to this. Go and leave your life of sin. Stop sinning. Stop continuing to sin. You cannot follow God and give yourself to sin. And John agrees. In verse 9 we read:

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. (1 John 3:9)

Notice that the sin John is talking about is continuous here. John has already made it clear that Jesus followers still sin. Jesus followers never get over their need of a Saviour. But Jesus followers don't let sin win. They don't let sin trap them and control them – they can't. Jesus followers fight sin, and overcome it, because God's seed remains in them – they've been born of God.

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What we sometimes miss in the story with the woman is that Jesus doesn't just forgive her. He doesn't just let her go. When Jesus speaks the words "Neither do I condemn you" there is real cost to what He says because grace without truth isn't grace at all. Grace without truth is either licentiousness – just doing whatever you want – or injustice. It's letting the guilty party off. And Jesus will not go there. Jesus will not offer grace without truth, instead He offers Himself. John says:

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that [Jesus] appeared so that He might take away our sins. (1 John 3:4-5)

And this is the gospel: Jesus came because sin is a real thing. There really was no other way. You see you and I are so bad – so sinful – that nothing other than the death of God is strong enough to pay for our sin. The gospel says that you are so bad that Jesus had no other option but to die in your place. But the gospel also says you are so loved that it was His joy to do it.

Jesus is full of grace and truth. And Jesus' seed is inside every one of His children and so, in the polarized world we live in where left and right look down on each other as stupid and evil, we bear the message of hope the world needs. We too can be full of grace and truth. Truth is real. There really is a standard. But Jesus died when we couldn't keep it because He wanted to keep us.

And for everyone who receives His death on their behalf Jesus puts His seed within us. So don't truth bomb or greasy grace. Your identity is not whether you lean left or right, you are a child of God. So hold Jesus' grace and truth together – Jesus the forgiver of sin is the hope of the world. So shine His light into every place He puts you.