

August 11 Lesson 11 (NIV)

## The Love of God

Devotional Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

Background Scripture: 1 John 3:1–10

1 John 3:1–10

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

<sup>4</sup> Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup> But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. <sup>6</sup> No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

<sup>7</sup> Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup> The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.

### Key Text

*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.—1 John 3:1*

Hope in the Lord

### Unit III: Eternal Hope

Lessons 10–13

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How to Say It

Colossians

Kuh-*losh*-unz.

Corinthians

Ko-*rin*-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Ephesus

*Ef*-uh-sus.

Galatians

Guh-*lay*-shunz.

Gnosticism

**Nahss**-tih-*sizz*-um.

gnostics

*nahss*-ticks.

Philippians

Fih-*lip*-ee-unz.

rubric

rew-brik.

## Introduction

### A. Using Rubrics

In education, a *rubric* is a guide for specifying criteria for academic assignments. A well-written rubric can be a lifesaver for both students and teachers. For the student, these tools provide expectations, goals, and guidance. For the teacher, rubrics help ensure fair and consistent grading. However, a poorly written or overly complicated rubric can create uncertainty and difficulty for teachers and students.

As a college professor, I frequently create rubrics for my students. In one such rubric, I accidentally used unclear directions for the assignment. As students worked on the project, they filled my email inbox with complaints and requests for help. Addressing their concerns and clarifying the rubric required a whole weekend of unplanned work. The next time I taught the class, I double-checked to be sure that the revised rubric did not contain unclear directions.

Today's Scripture reveals a rubric for living as beloved children of God. Unlike the rubric I created, this one is clear and straightforward. As you read the Scripture, consider this question: Will you pass or fail the final assignment?

### B. Lesson Context

Five books of the New Testament have traditionally been attributed to the apostle John, who was one of the original 12 disciples (Matthew 10:2). Three of the five—the ones we designate 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John—are letters from the apostle to various believers in the first century AD.

Church history strongly associates John with the church in Ephesus, located in modern-day Turkey. Tradition says he died in this city in the AD 90s. The three letters were probably written in the region of Ephesus. The letters date from the AD 80s or 90s. John would have been an older man by this time (compare the self-designation “the elder” in 2 John 1; 3 John 1). The dignity of his age peeks through in 1 John as he addresses his readers as “dear children” nine times (examples: 1 John 2:1; 3:7).

We are unsure of the issues that faced the letter's original audience. Apparently, they had been confronted with threats to their faith. Some of these threats included the temptation from an early form of the attractive heresy we call Gnosticism. Among other things, gnostics taught that it did not matter whether a person had morality or love—as long as he or she had “secret knowledge.” To combat this false teaching, John emphasized the connection between right belief, right actions, and right love. The child of God must believe the truth, obey the commands, and love the brethren. False teachers were so bold that John referred to them as having a “spirit of antichrist” (1 John 4:3; compare 2:18, 22). John wanted their influence eliminated lest they split the church further (see 2:19).

The church also faced more general threats, including the denial that Jesus is Christ (1 John 2:22), a return to idol worship (5:21), and a general lack of love for one another (4:7).

## I. The Love of God

(1 John 3:1–3)

### A. Our Identity (v. 1)

#### **1a. See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!**

John had established that God is righteous and that “everyone who does what is right has been born of him” (1 John 2:29). John draws the attention of his audience to the *love of God the Father*. This love was *lavished* on humanity through the Father’s sending of his only Son, Jesus, to earth for our sins (Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). There was nothing that humanity could do to deserve God’s love. No amount of human love for God could influence *what great love* God has for humanity (4:9–10).

When people demonstrate faith in Jesus, they become *children of God* (John 1:12–13; Galatians 3:26). This adoption occurs through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit so that we might share in God’s glory (Romans 8:14–17). Therefore, adoption into God’s family comes not through physical birth but spiritual birth (John 3:5–8).

#### **1b. And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.**

The underlying Greek word translated *world* appears 23 times in 1 John. If we were to count all the uses of this word in the writings of John, it would total over 100 uses. In John’s writings, the term can refer to all humanity in general (examples: John 3:16; 1 John 2:2), the location where humanity lives (example: John 17:11), or to the sinful individuals and structures that oppose God and his people (examples: 1 John 2:16–17; 3:13; 5:4–5).

It is the final option to which this verse refers. In contrast to the children of God, *the world* has failed to *know* God and his abundant love revealed through Christ Jesus. Therefore, the world is also unable to *know* the children of God. As a result, believers can anticipate facing hatred from the world (John 15:18–25).

### B. God’s Purity (vv. 2–3)

#### **2a. Dear friends, now we are children of God,**

John uses the greeting *dear friends* six times in this epistle (here and in 1 John 2:7; 3:21; 4:1, 7, 11). The greeting reveals the relationship that John had with his audience. Although he was an older man when writing this epistle, he felt a close connection with them. He counted himself with them (*we*) as being *children of God*.

#### **2b. 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.**

As God’s children, we do not fully know God’s plan for our lives. But we know we will someday be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51–54). *What we eventually will be* has not yet been disclosed fully. Even so, we know this: when Jesus *appears* at his second coming, *we shall see him as he is* because we will see him face-to-face.

At that time, *we shall be like him*. Christ will transform our bodies into something glorious (Philippians 3:20–21). In and through this transformation, we will share in Christ’s glory (Romans 8:17; Colossians 3:4).

### **3a. All who have this hope in him purify themselves,**

The verse before us contains the only usage of the underlying Greek noun *hope* in any of the writings of John. In contrast, the apostle Paul uses the term about three dozen times throughout his epistles. *This hope* comes from what has been promised to believers regarding the future return of Christ. Hope, however, is not simply a positive outlook or feeling. Instead, our hope comes from the trustworthiness of God’s character. We have hope because of what God has promised to do *in* Christ (see Titus 2:13–14, lesson 12).

This verse contains only the second usage of the Greek word translated *purify* in the writings of John. Thus, we have two rare (for John) words back-to-back, drawing our attention. *Purify* refers either to (1) ceremonial purification per the Law of Moses (John 11:55; Acts 24:18), (2) taking a vow when the word is used with a particular grammatical construction (21:23–24, 26), or (3) moral purification (James 4:8; 1 Peter 1:22). Its usage in the verse before us reflects the third option.

### **3b. just as he is pure.**

The antecedent of the word *he* refers to Christ. It is he who *is pure*, meaning he is sinless (see commentary on 1 John 3:5, below). Christ’s blood shed on the cross is the means through which our purification from sin occurs (1:7). This does not mean believers are “off the hook” from living upright and righteous lives. Instead, believers should purify themselves and avoid the stain of sin (see 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Timothy 5:22). Such purification occurs when believers put an end to all sinful behaviors (Colossians 3:5). As we do so, we develop lives of righteousness (James 1:19–20).

John’s directives in this verse mirror Jesus’ teachings: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Human perfection is impossible on earth. However, we should make every effort to live pure and upright lives as children of our perfect heavenly Father.

## **II. The Mission of God**

### **(1 John 3:4–6)**

#### **A. Our Situation (v. 4)**

#### **4. Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.**

Having established the life of purity required for God’s children, John presents the danger that believers face: that of sin. The human inclination toward sin is unavoidable for all people—believers included. Scripture describes *sin* in various ways. Sin is foolishness (Proverbs 24:9), the opposite of faith (Romans 14:23), falling short of God’s glory (3:23), a willful failure to do good (James 4:17), or any “wrongdoing” (1 John 5:17). Ultimately, sin turns people into enemies of God.

Perhaps you remember from high-school English classes that when you see the verb *is*, you can almost think of it as an equal sign (=) that equates the two sides of the sentence. That is indeed true here: *sin = lawlessness*. This verse is the clearest definition of sin in the New Testament. Perhaps you've heard sin vaguely defined as "to miss the mark" or some such. But right before us now is the biblical definition of sin.

## **B. God's Solution (vv. 5–6)**

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

The Greek word translated *know* appears 15 times in 1 John. Its use reveals the apostle's emphasis on knowing the person and work of Jesus Christ. But simply having knowledge of Jesus is not enough (compare James 2:19). Instead, believers should seek understanding of Christ and conform their lives to that knowledge (see 1 John 5:18–20).

Only one person could take away humanity's sins: Jesus Christ (John 1:29). Only Jesus has the power to deal with sin because he was the sinless Son of God (2 Corinthians 5:21; compare Isaiah 53:9–10). He and he alone could *take away our sins* through his sacrifice on the cross (see Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 2:22–24).

### **6a. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning.**

John begins a contrast of two types of people. The first is the person who *lives in* Christ. Jesus taught that believers should remain in him because he is the source of spiritual life (John 15:4–7). Believers do so by receiving his teachings (1 John 2:24) and obeying them (John 14:23; 15:10; 1 John 3:24). Doing so does not mean that believers will be perfect and without any sin (compare 1:8, 10). Rather, when we follow the perfect, sinless Savior, we can pursue lives of holiness and righteousness.

### **6b. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.**

The second type is the person who has neither *seen* Christ nor *known* him. Some people in John's original audience had apparently claimed that they could know God but continue to live sinful lives. This false belief led to a strong correction from the apostle: it was not possible to both love God and love sin (1 John 1:6; 2:4).

## **III. The Children of God**

### **(1 John 3:7–10)**

#### **A. Our Warning (vv. 7–8)**

### **7. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.**

The phrase *dear children* is a favorite greeting of the apostle John. His nine uses of the expression in 1 John reveal the care that he felt for the original recipients of the letter (examples: 1 John 2:1, 12, 28; 3:18; 5:21). They were all children of God, but John had a unique relationship with his audience—one like a spiritual father and his children.

Some people in the community had attempted to deceive the believers and *lead them astray* from the truth (see Lesson Context; see also 1 John 2:26). Although we do not know the content of their teaching, we can do a “mirror reading” of 1 John to determine aspects of their false doctrine. Based on this verse, we can assume that these teachers had wrongly taught that a person could be *righteous* without behaving righteously.

However, this verse does not mean that John taught a form of works-righteousness. Humans cannot attain righteousness through their behavior (Romans 3:10). Only Christ Jesus is completely *righteous* (2 Corinthians 5:21). People can become righteous before God through faith in Christ (see Romans 3:21–26; 5:17). As a result of their being declared righteous by God, believers should live upright lives in obedience to him (1 John 2:3–5).

**8a. The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning.**

In contrast to the righteous person is the person who *does what is sinful* and disobeys God’s law. People who willfully oppose God and his truth are following the devil’s lies (see John 8:44; Acts 13:10). This spirit of disobedience results in a person’s spiritual death (see Ephesians 2:1–2).

*The devil* is another name for Satan (see Revelation 12:9). Since the introduction of sin at *the beginning*, the devil has opposed God and the people of God. The devil’s opposition comes through temptation (examples: Genesis 3:1; Luke 4:1–13; John 13:2). Therefore, believers should “not give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:27). Instead, we should make every effort to resist the work of the devil (see 6:10–17; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8–9).

**8b. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.**

Jesus Christ, *the Son of God*, came to earth as a sacrifice for human sin (1 John 3:5, above). By doing so, he triumphed over the devil (Colossians 2:13–15; Hebrews 2:14–15). Although Christ has already won the victory (Galatians 1:4), the devil has power in the world for a time (1 John 5:19). That power, however, is limited. Someday, Christ will return *to destroy* the devil and *the devil’s work* (see Romans 16:20; Revelation 20:1–10).

**B. God’s Seed (vv. 9–10)**

**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.**

The underlying Greek word translated *born* appears 10 times in 1 John. All instances of that word in this letter refer to a person’s spiritual birth into being a child *of God*. People who have experienced this spiritual birth do what is right (1 John 2:29), know God and love others (4:7), believe that Jesus is the Christ (5:1), overcome the world (5:4), and will not continue to sin (5:18).

God’s children will continue to wage war against sin and its effects (see 1 Peter 2:11). Although we have been released from sin and freed from its condemnation (Romans 6:1–14; 8:1), our sinful nature will continue until Christ returns to deliver us (7:14–25). When John says that believers *cannot go one sinning*, he does not mean that we will live perfect lives. Instead, John’s words are meant to encourage us to seek godly and upright lives.

Believers can avoid a life of sin because they have the *seed* of God in them. This seed is “planted” when believers receive the gospel (see 1 John 2:24) and the Holy Spirit (see 3:24). Only through the power of God’s Spirit that *remains in* us can we fight sin (Romans 8:5–16; Galatians 5:16–17; etc.).

**10. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God’s child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.**

This verse presents a rubric to distinguish *the children of God* from *the children of the devil*. That status is revealed by a person’s actions: children of God *do what is right* (1 John 2:29; compare 3:7, above). Further, a person’s status is also measured in how he or she loves other members of the family of God. As the love of God fills believers, there will be a natural outpouring of *love* among believers (3:11–24; 4:7–21). The person who habitually fails to act with righteousness or demonstrate love is not *God’s child*. The rubric is clear, and it is pass-or-fail in this regard.

## Conclusion

### A. Spiritual Rubrics

Rubrics help learners understand expectations and how to achieve an assignment’s intended goals. Today’s Scripture gives us a rubric for whether or not we live as though we have been filled by God’s love. If his love has changed our lives, then we will seek lives of holiness and demonstrate love for others.

God’s love has transformed us, but we are still affected by the presence of sin. Until the ultimate defeat of Satan, we will fail to behave or love as we ought. In the meantime, God has given us tools to help us grow spiritually. He has given us his Spirit to transform us into Christ’s likeness. God has also provided us with a spiritual “family”: other children of God. These spiritual “siblings” can encourage us to live according to the rubric of life that God has given us.

### B. Prayer

Loving God, you have shown us tremendous mercy and brought us into your family. We repent of the times when we have failed to love you and our neighbors. Show us how we might better notice the Spirit’s leading so that we will not remain in sin. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

The rubric is clear: God’s children love him and seek lives of righteousness.<sup>1</sup>

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