

**“Out of Bondage”**  
**1 John 3:4-18**  
**July 20, 2014**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

If the theme of last week’s passage was the second coming of Christ, indicated by the repetition of the phrase, **“when he appears”** (2:28; 3:2), the theme of this week’s passage is the first coming of Jesus, indicated by the past tense of the same word, **“appeared”** (3:5, 8). John tells us in the simplest of language why Jesus came. He did so to **“take away sins”** and to **“destroy the works of the devil.”** The force of his argument is that since the purpose of Jesus’ first coming was to deal with sin, and since at his second coming he will complete that work as we come to the place of being as morally pure as Jesus, how can we now continue in sin without any grief or remorse? Verse 10 summarizes his argument. **“No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.”** We know he’s not saying that Christians don’t sin, because he has already said that all who claim perfection are deceiving themselves and have no truth in them (1:8). He is saying that Christians do not and cannot practice habitual and persistent sin.

So in today’s passage, John is going to present some basic teaching on why Jesus came. He’s going to explain what our basic problem is and God’s method of addressing this problem, and then the outcome of this solution in a changed life marked by love. Before considering these points individually, let’s talk a little about their relevancy to us by asking a question. What do you think is the source of your unhappiness? What needs to change in your life in order to make you happy? The Bible is clear in teaching that all of our misery comes from sin and the devil. The most common mistake people make is to conclude that their happiness lies along the path of changed circumstances. That was actually the content of Satan’s first lie to Adam and Eve, as he suggested to them that they would be much happier and experience more personal satisfaction if their circumstances could be changed so that they could eat that fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We are still believing that lie, being persuaded that happiness would come if I just had a little more money, or carried a little less weight, or possessed a little more physical health, or had a spouse who behaved a little better or a job with less stress. While there is nothing wrong with any of those things, there is everything wrong with believing they are the source of our central problem. They are not. Our central problem is the one Jesus came to solve, the problem of sin and the devil. Do you believe that? If there is a desire in your life that is greater than a desire to love and obey Jesus more wholeheartedly, then you don’t believe that. So let’s consider these points now so that we can learn how to enter into the happiness God has for us through Jesus.

## I. The Real Problem

I know of no one who thinks that things in the world are the way they're supposed to be. People agree that there is a problem. But when it comes to a solution for the problem, there is widespread disagreement simply because of disagreement about the specific nature of the problem. Political conservatives think that our main problem is too much government. Liberals think our problem is too little government. Atheists think the problem is people like us who believe in God. Environmentalists think the main problem is our abuse of the environment. Racists think the problem is too many people not like us. Materialists think the problem is inadequate funding of whatever problem confronting us. Pacifists think the problem is spending too much money on the military and militarists think it's spending too little. On and on we could go with this. The point is that people have different ideas about the central problems we face.

The Bible is clear about our main problems, and John speaks clearly of two problems: sin and the devil. When God came to the earth in the form of his Son, Jesus, to set things straight, he didn't come with a political solution or a financial one or a military one. He knows that our foundational problems are these two. John says **“that he appeared to take away sins”** (3:5). And since sin came to the earth from the devil, Jesus also came **“to destroy the works of the devil”** (3:8). All our unhappiness in life comes from following the devil into sin, and Jesus has come to correct this situation.

Let's look a little more carefully at these problems by looking at the nature of the devil. John says he has been sinning from the beginning, by which I understand him to mean not the beginning of his existence, but from the beginning of the creation of the earth. There is a very important passage about Satan that comes from what John records of Jesus' teaching about him. Speaking to those who were rejecting him, Jesus said, **“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies”** (John 8:44). So he is a murderer and a liar.

Satan is a murderer because he hates God's image bearers and wants to destroy them. He seeks to do so by lying. We can see that in the temptation he put before Adam and Eve. He told at least three lies in that encounter with the first human couple. His first lie was about God's attitude towards Adam and Eve. He told them that God really didn't care for them. His motives in forbidding their eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were selfish motives arising out of his lack of care for them. Second, he told a lie about the

will of God, suggesting to them that eating of that tree would be for their good, giving them as high a status as God himself. True freedom, Satan claimed, comes from throwing off the restraints found in the will of God. His third lie denied that there would be any bad consequences from violating God's law. Satan directly contradicted God when he said, **"You will not surely die"** (Gen. 3:4). Then his lie becomes even bolder as he goes on to say that not only will they not die, but they will experience the benefit of becoming like God (3:5).

Not much has changed when it comes to Satan and his tactics. He is still telling the same lies, and people still believe him. He lies about the character of God. How many people blame God for the problems in this world? They see him as the problem, not the solution, to this world's ills. He lies about the will of God, convincing people that happiness is found by doing what you want instead of what God wants. And he lies about the consequences of disobedience, saying that nothing bad is really going to happen if we disobey God. You can sin without suffering any ill effects, Satan claims, both in this life and in the life to come, because there really is no such thing as hell. Our problems all stem from believing these lies.

## **II. The Only Solution**

Jesus has come to take away sin and to destroy the works of the devil. There are many other problems in this world, but others can address those. Poverty is a problem, but we can address that one as we learn to share with and help one another. Sickness and disease is a big problem that Jesus could have tackled, and in part he did, healing many. But again, many advances have been made in helping address the problem of disease, and Jesus didn't come the first time to rid the world of cancer. He came to lay the foundation for a cancer-free world by solving the root problems that only he could solve, the root problems of sin and the tyrannical reign of the devil.

Only Jesus can solve these two problems. He is the sacrifice for sin accepted by God. No other sacrifice will do. Not only is this sacrifice accepted by God as payment for sin, it is the sacrifice supplied by God. In the next chapter, John is going to say, **"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins"** (4:10). If Jesus is the sacrifice supplied by God, then we can be confident that he is the sacrifice accepted by God to take away sins.

Jesus also came to destroy the works of the devil. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus spoke of his work of destroying the devil as that of entering a strong man's house and binding that strong man so that his house can then be plundered. Satan is that strong man, and Jesus has bound him. He can still snarl and threaten, but his power has been neutralized by Jesus. Only Jesus

has sufficient power and authority for this. What are these works of the devil that Jesus has destroyed? His works are many. He tempts people to sin through his lies. He inflicts diseases upon people, and he seduces people into false teaching. Jesus has come to destroy these works and free us from the bondage of this strong man.

### **III. The Enjoyment of the Solution**

John is now ready for his main point in this section. If Jesus has done all that he has done to deal with this problem of sin, then our attitude and practice related to sin cannot remain unaffected by this. The power of sin and Satan have been destroyed by Jesus so that we no longer need to be enslaved to sin. The problem that John has been dealing with throughout his letter is that it is easy to be self-deceived about this. So he gives some tests to help us know whether we have entered into this new life Jesus came to bring.

Years ago, I remember reading about a woman who was sitting at her gate at the airport eating from the open bag of cookies sitting on the empty seat beside her. To her great surprise (and anger), the man sitting in the seat on the other side of the cookies reached in and helped himself to a cookie. She couldn't believe his boldness and presumption. For the next few minutes, without a word passing between them, they both kept reaching in the bag to eat another cookie until there was only one left. He looked at her and smiled and said, "I've saved the last one for you." Well, that was too much. She picked up her bags and stomped off to another seat. Not long after that, the boarding process began. As she got to her seat, she reached into her bag for the book she planned on reading during the flight, and there she saw her unopened bag of cookies. The whole time she was eating those cookies, thinking they were hers, she was actually eating cookies that belonged to the man she thought so presumptuous. In the same way, John says that it is very easy to be wrongly convinced that we are a child of God when we actually aren't.

To help us discern the truth about our spiritual state, John offers again one of his most common tests, the test of love. **"We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers"** (3:14). John knows, though, that even this test can be filled with the slipperiness of self-deceit. It is easy to think of yourself as a loving person when you actually aren't. So he presses this test further in two ways. First, he states the heart of true love by making reference to the gold standard of love, the love of Jesus. **"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers"** (v. 16). At the heart of love is death. If you want to love someone, you must be willing to die. In his book, *A Loving Life*, Paul Miller gives this common example of love that is willing to die.

A wife tries to develop intimacy with her husband through criticism. The theory behind her approach is that if he would get better, then she could love him. Let's say that the husband has been working at whatever his wife says. He uses her criticism as a way of making himself like Christ. And yet, the criticism keeps coming. It is almost a language, a way of relating. When he challenges his wife about whether she has a critical spirit, he just gets more criticism. The unfairness of love can wear on your soul (p. 42).

A husband (or wife) in such a marriage can easily feel trapped. What is required is Christlike love, and at the heart of this kind of love is the willingness to die. When you receive the love of Jesus, it does something to you. I'm struck by the graphic language of verse 9, where John says, **"No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him."** The Greek word for "seed" is *sperma*, from which we get our similar English word. The life of God is planted within, and the life is characterized by love, and that love is characterized by death.

John is a wise teacher, and he knows that still it would be easy to deceive yourself regarding the presence of love in the heart. So he brings up a specific application. **"If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth"** (3:17-18). Note the singular, "his *brother*." John is not talking here about loving people as a group, but about loving people as individuals. One commentator says it like this. "It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital "H" than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular." So John presses us to look at our lives in this area of loving individual people with a love that is willing to die. And he presses it even further in his example by bringing up this area of giving of our own money to bring such help. He's still not done, because he then brings up the matter of the heart. It is not enough, he says, merely to give away some money to help people. Rather, there must be a heart for the person in need, though he states the situation negatively by speaking of the person who **"closes his heart"** against the brother in need. This is the kind of love that can only come by the seed of God within because that is God-like love that only comes in the new birth.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let us celebrate the release of bondage brought by Jesus and let God's seed within teach us to love with a Christ-like love. This is the source of all happiness.