**Sunday 18th April 2021**

Psalm 4

1 John 3: 1-7

We continue this week in 1 John; A letter that the apostle John wrote to Christian churches towards the end of the first century. We looked last week at the culture at the time that John wrote the letter – with the new religion Gnosticism emerging and beginning to infiltrate the churches.

The Gnostics believed that Spiritual goodness could be achieved by gaining certain knowledge, and once the mind knew this knowledge, evil could not harm them as the body was completely separate from Spirit, so that they could enjoy communion with God but without having to live in a moral way – no need to keep God’s laws.

Hence John is addressing the falseness of this new teaching. He is re-iterating that God is interested in the whole, the body and Spirit, and that His laws were very much still in force.

Chapter 3 begins with “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”.

Yes, we are children of God because of His love for us – but to become children rests on our acceptance of that love. So can everyone claim to be a child of God?

In the preceding chapter John has described three tests to help the Christians at the time he was writing weigh up whether the teachers they came into contact with truly knew God – and they still apply to us today.

The first was a moral test – simply knowing about God in head knowledge is not enough. To know God truly you needed to respect and obey His laws. Remember the purpose of providing laws was to protect ourselves and each other, to provide safety for those who were weaker and in need of protection. The laws promoted a moral social standard keeping each person away from harm.

To know God was to have a personal acquaintance with Him, a relationship. John uses the phrase “to live in Him” which is equivalent to knowing Him, loving Him and abiding in Him – like a branch in a vine. Although the branch may grow in a different direction, and is high off the ground, it is still given nutrients from the root, the source of the vine. And it’s identity is still being part of the one vine.

If someone claims that they know God, but do not have to keep His laws, then they are false teachers – they know ABOUT God, but they do not know Him – they are not seeking sustenance from Him – seeking to live in the earthly community He desires for us.

The second is a social test. The law Jesus stated is “to love each other (your neighbor), as Jesus has loved us”. Now, the command to love each other was an old command, but John treats it equally as a new command. This new part was the depth and richness that Jesus had added to it, by the way He had lived it out, the extent of the measures of love He showed people, finishing in His willingness to die for us – living out God’s redeeming plan.

The parable of the Good Samaritan had expanded the meaning of neighbor – it is beyond a certain race or rank – it is everyone, even those who had shown you enmity.

Genuine love is to have the right relationship to both God and to people. We have seen how Jesus loved everyone. In Jesus there was no hate for anyone; He hated the actions that some took, but he could not hate the people and continually extended the truth and forgiveness to everyone.

If anyone claims to know God then there should be an inability to hate anyone. It is hating someone that distorts our perspective and will lead to mis-judgement. Equally, I know that it is difficult to LIKE everyone, but we should still be able to love them. Not to wish harm on them, or to inflict harm or revenge on them. Revenge is different to justice!

John then provides a third test regarding doctrine. In his description he often uses the word “antichrist”. This does not necessarily mean “against” but perhaps more commonly “instead of”. Either of them will seldom be an obvious red being with pointy tail, horns and pitchfork! In the alternative teachings in the time of John, just as now, there are mixtures of both – some teaching against Christ and others providing a subtle substitute – and those who do not know God will easily be led astray to a belief in God with easy terms.

If you truly know God, you will persevere in obeying His laws and abiding in Him – despite the circumstances you find yourself in. And it will take perseverance not to succumb to things available to you that are not in line with God’s desires. Salvation is not a reward for perseverance – but perseverance should be a hallmark of salvation. Jesus already loves you, He has already died for you – so you do not have to earn His love, His salvation. It already is available to you. To accept it, to grasp it, you do need to have that personal relationship with Him to help you turn away from temptations.

God has promised you that relationship. Jeremiah 31:34 “No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying “Know the Lord”, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

I personally think that we are only partially towards the fullness of that prophesy – I still believe that we do need the teachings of men and women – foundations firmly in the biblical truths. However, we do have the Holy Spirit. In the OT days the priests would anoint people with oil, to give them Spiritual protection. However, when Jesus was baptized He was anointed with the Holy Spirit – before He then faced temptations in the wilderness.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to also illuminate the truth to us – to teach us truthfully. The Holy Spirit strengthened Christ to overcome the temptations that He faced.

The ultimate test of Christianity is accepting fully the Person of Christ – as the incarnate Son of God. There are no easy terms to this truth, and without accepting the truth that Jesus is the Son, then we cannot have fellowship with God the Father. For anyone to fully accept that wonderful mystery, there is a need for the apostolic teachings AND the Holy Spirit, working together.

If we accept the above, we will indeed be children of God. This is the answer to the question “can everyone claim to be a child of God?” – only those who accept Jesus as the Son of God who came to complete God’s plan and promote His law; who place themselves under the authority of God – that is when we can claim to be His child. John states “The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him”. This emphasizes that the mystery of Jesus has to be accepted.

As His children we are promised an inheritance – “that we will be like him”. The fact that John continues that neither he himself, or we, know what that is going to be, implies that he is talking about the second coming of Christ.

Although we do not know what heaven is going to be like, we can trust that if Jesus is there it is going to be wonderful – because His actions have shown that He is wonderful.

I like the way that John is being honest, showing us that it is OK to be ignorant of things not yet revealed – that is the reason why I said that the prophesy is only partially fulfilled, because we still need the power of the Holy Spirit and the bible to understand God – we do not know Him fully yet.

God has not revealed our inheritance in fullness yet, so if He has not yet imparted that knowledge, the Holy Spirit cannot reveal it to us either until the Father’s time.

What is revealed is the order of that revelation. First Christ shall appear. Then we shall see Him and then we shall become like Him.

Although we do not have the details of the second coming, John steers us to the everlasting truth of Jesus’ character that we have already seen in the first appearance. Jesus came to take our sins from us.

Remember to keep in mind the false teachings at the time – that you could live an immoral life and still have communion with God. That is a lie.

We need to recognize sin – not to play it down or make excuses. As I said last week, if too lenient then we spread the belief that there are no consequences to sin. The word for sin that John used in Greek means “missing the mark”. Unrighteous is a departure from what is right or just. To miss the mark must mean that we are at least aiming to obey God.

John says of Jesus “in Him is no sin”. That does not just apply to His life as a man on earth, but for the whole past, present and future. Eternally sinless.

That is what we should be aiming for, but it would be impossible for us to never miss the mark. But if we recognize our wrongdoing, we are assured that Jesus shed His blood for our forgiveness, to redeem us, to reconcile us to Father, to bring us back into a relationship of love with God.

Jesus will continue to plead as our advocate, to plead for our pardon and forgiveness – because of who He is.

The question that we had last week “how many times will Jesus forgive us our sins” and the answer was, and still is, that His forgiveness is limitless. BUT He does look at our intention in how we are trying to live, that the desire in our heart is to reflect Him and His ways. He does not just listen to what our voice and tongue is saying.

We should not condone sin or try to excuse it. But when we miss that mark, as we all will in our imperfections – we must bring it before Christ, bring it fully in the open, speak it out at the foot of the cross, and ultimately do our best to turn away completely from that temptation.

Remember, Jesus already loves you, He has already died for you, salvation is available to you. Accept it, grasp it, build that personal relationship with Him and He will be with you as you persevere against temptations. Grasp, with wonder and amazement the fullness of being a child of God.