

## What Makes Us Like Christ

### *2 Corinthians 2:17-3:18; 1 John 2:26-3:3*

It happens that certain generations of people will live through seasons of change that have been centuries in the building. It is startling to think that a little more than a hundred years ago almost all of the countries in Europe were still ruled by kings and queens, lords and ladies, privy councils and lord chamberlains. And then a single, violent storm, starting in August 1914 and lasting four years until November 1918, that one war swept the medieval furniture away, so that now you can probably count on one hand the countries who are really ruled by kings and queens anymore.

And I think we're in a similar season of change today, not another violent storm like World War I, but we've seen the subtle erosion of traditional institutions and values and customs, all overtaken by the breadth and speed and the all-encompassing volume of modern communications. Of course, this sort of change is not really new. Wind-borne, market-borne, migration-borne, idea-borne change has been sweeping aside civilizations ever since Cain migrated east of Eden because he wouldn't live by the values of the believing community Adam and Eve began to build in the wreckage after the Fall.

Certainly the passage I've just read to you this morning was written during a season of this sort of change in the first century, in the eastern Mediterranean, where the early Christians were trying to carve out a way of life. Our own letter writer, John the Apostle, had grown up in Old Israel, practicing religious customs and mores taught by Moses, more than a thousand years before. John's father Zebedee was a fisherman, prosperous enough that he appears to have married into a family somehow connected to the Israelite priests/politicians who ruled Israel under the Romans in those days.

But whatever ambitions Zebedee might have had for his two sons, James and John, went by the wayside on the day they met Jesus on the Capernaum beach. "*Follow me,*" Jesus told them, "*and I'll make you fishers of men.*" Now Jesus was a working class visionary who was about to electrify first Galilee and then all Judea, and then finally the whole Roman Empire with the news that he was God's own Son, sent to establish an unarmed, boundary-less kingdom that would ultimately sweep aside every other kingdom that presumed to stand in its way.

We heard last week from Jesus that his kingdom was wind-borne. One night in John's own gospel, Jesus told Nicodemus that God had sent his Spirit, like the wind, to wander to and fro among people like you and me. And he went on to teach that some of us would be "*born from*

*above*”, *”anointed”* by the Spirit, to understand that Jesus is the Savior, long ago prophesied, who would save people like us from all that’s gone wrong, in us, among us and around us.

And lots had gone wrong in the fifty years since old man John had last seen Jesus’ face and heard Jesus voice. Old Israel was gone. A Roman antichrist had turned the temple John knew as a boy and the great old Jerusalem mansions where some of John’s cousins may have grown up into little but rubble, ruins and smoke. And the violence and confusion that had exploded out of old Israel had rippled into the new Christian congregations where a tribe of antichrists had begun to teach that maybe the old commandments no longer applied, maybe it’s wrong to see God’s Son as a man descended from Israelites, wrong to think that Jesus was a Christ, an Israelite sort of king.

And the upset and the confusion that arose among the faithful was enough to cause old man John, the last apostle standing, to warn this new generation of Christians that they lived in *“the last hour”*. Because everything Jesus warned would happen after the fall of old Jerusalem was swinging into play, *“wolves in sheep’s clothing...false prophets and false christs”*, deceit and manipulation, violence and persecution all designed to lead young Christians away from gospel and faith and family and church. And what John teaches to see us through the last days is for us to *“abide in”*, to stick with the gospel and the Spirit-anointing who led us to Christ and church in the first place : *“Let what you heard in the beginning abide in you...”*, John taught us last week. This week he promises, *“...the anointing you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you.”*

The point being that what we’ve learned from our Bibles and the Spirit-anointing that got us to Church in the first place is the foundation we should stick with over and against that teaching that would lead us away from Christ and gospel and family and Church. We don’t need human teachers who diminish Christ as Savior and Lord, who don’t think the Bible is true and trustworthy, who alienate us from parents and spouses and children and brothers and sisters, who disparage and undermine the relationships that define us as leaders and servants, brothers and sisters at church.

If we really know Christ, John tells us, we were *“born from above”*, given an *“anointing”* by God’s Spirit that’ll lead us toward Christ and gospel and family and Church and not away from the covenants that guard and save us. So John doesn’t treat us to a tutorial on all the ways strange teachers from outside the Church can lead us wrong. Instead, he exhorts us to stick with the anointing that brought us to Christ in the first place. *“And now, little children,”* he writes, *“abide in Christ, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed at his coming.”*

The point being that our characters are not shaped primarily by the abstract concepts we learn from the doctrine we take to mind and heart. Doctrine is necessary, people who don't learn gospel truth are aimless and clueless spiritually and otherwise. But what gives truth the force and weight it needs to become convictions inside us are the relationships by which truth comes to us. The look on my father and mother's face when they heard lies and nonsense was first place that I began to learn that there was such a thing as truth, such a thing as gospel.

We need parents and teachers, pastors and leaders because human beings don't learn anything entirely in the abstract. We learn things, our hearts and minds are molded for better or for worse by the system of relationships we find around us which either reinforces or undermines the gospel as it comes our way, depending on where the people we trust stand with God.

And what John is teaching his readers and us is that the primary relationship through which the gospel should find its weight and balance within us is that anointing we experienced, that gospel we believed when we gave our lives to Christ. We should look to Christ for feedback about where we're headed the way I used to search my father's and mother's and teacher's face in those moments when what I wanted or where I was headed began to feel shaky. John tells us, *"...abide in Christ, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed at his coming."*

You know someone, love someone, trust someone and pretty soon you develop a sort of instinct for what's going to fly with that person...or what's going to offend everything he or she stands for. Love relationships are the laboratory in which human beings learn character. And what John is teaching us this morning is that in the swirl of the last days, in an environment where the relationships that used to hold us together in family and church are under question and up for grabs, we will need to know Christ, love Christ, trust Christ enough so that his thoughts, his feelings, his character become instinctively interwoven with our thoughts and feelings and character.

John goes on, *"...abide in Christ, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed at his coming. If you know that Christ is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness is born of him."* The point being all relationships are experimental. There is no being close to anyone without our opening our hearts to be shaped and refined by the person we want to know and love and trust. But this relationship with Christ doesn't take place in a vacuum. I've repeatedly said that John doesn't even bring up abiding in Christ without first reminding us that the commandments still hold, right is still right, wrong is still wrong, God is still God. The notion that the gospel of Jesus is ethically, morally at odds with the law of Moses, that the Father of Jesus is Someone other than the severe uncompromising Judge of the Old

Testament is patently false. It follows that this experimental relationship that John invites us to undertake with Jesus must be governed by what the Bible teaches is right and true.

Jesus is righteous and yet we don't become righteous memorizing and executing a moral code in the abstract. The foundation of any righteousness we might attain is the love relationship with the Father that Jesus won for us when he bore our sin and guilt and shame on the Cross. John writes: *"See what love the Father has given us that we should become children of God, and so we are!"* John adds in a voice of wonder. The faith we invest in Jesus, the anointing that led us to love and trust him, ushers us into a parent-child relationship with the Almighty himself. We can live in his presence, as we learn his Word we can feel in our hearts that joy and that censure that all good parents radiate to their children without malice or condemnation.

Where the relationship leads, how exactly it ends? John tells us quite frankly that he doesn't know: *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be is not yet revealed, but we know that, when Christ is revealed, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is."* Get near him, spend time with Christ, and we become just like him in the end. How exactly that happens the Scripture never explicitly say. There is no biblical prescription on how to abide in Christ because you can't prescribe a relationship. They just happen and no one can say just exactly how.

Not that modern Christians haven't tried. I was told in my campus Bible studies that I needed to have a "quiet time" with God if I ever wanted to be like Christ. Quiet time is one of those two word combinations that never occur in Scripture, kind of like "free will". I asked more mature believers what their quiet time was like and never got the same answer twice. That's how relationships work. They're all different. One campus group pictured our relationship with God like a wheel with four spokes. One spoke was Bible reading, one spoke was prayer, one spoke was fellowship with other Christians. I forget what the fourth spoke was, worship? service? I'm not sure.

And there's value in prescriptions like these. A relationship in which one never listens to the other person goes nowhere, so we probably should open our Bibles and allow God's thoughts to work their way into ours. We should express something of love and gratitude and honestly to God in prayer. To love a Father and neglect his family is not to love the Father, so we should go to Church and open our hearts and minds to each other. Worship has to be more than a spoke on the wheel. The Bible picture worship as the center of all life. All they do in the visions of Revelation is worship.

The point being that you can't prescribe what abiding in Christ is any more than you could tell a husband how to love his wife or a wife her husband. The very nature of love relationships is that they are different in every case. But there are constants that must be respected in every case. A

love relationship that isn't given time and place to happen won't happen. It will wither and die if there was any life there in the first place. John had a vision where Jesus confronted the mega-church in Ephesus and rebuked them even though they were busy being pious and devout: *"You've lost your first love! Repent...or I will come and extinguish your lampstand."*

Jesus said to another church, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in."* Note carefully that what Jesus rebukes in these two cases are not so much mistakes in technique or doctrine, but that drift that takes place whenever we fail to attend to or care about a love relationship. My one quiet time is anything but quiet.

I read, I pray, I wander around the property, trying to understand the storms that brew in my heart, the notions about life that church in my time. I have a limited aptitude for contentment and rest and I need the help of other Christians whose own walk with God is wired differently than mine.

But, however imperfectly our relationships with Christ unfold, the critical thing is that each of us make time and place for it to happen, in our own private spaces where each of us learns to steal time for God, and together in our families and here in church, first in the worship God has commanded us to offer each week and then in those fellowships where his Spirit will call us to know and love and trust each other.