

The Books of 1, 2, and 3 John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: Children of God

1 John 2:28–3:10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Two great doctrines meet in this passage, and the teacher should hold them together without weakening either. The first is the believer's identity as a child of God, a status given by the Father's astonishing love and received through being born of God, not a universal birthright that belongs automatically to every person. The teacher should make clear that the New Testament reserves the language of God's children for those who have received Christ and been born again (John 1:12–13), while genuinely marveling, as John does, at the love that grants it. Bound to this identity is the believer's hope: when Christ appears we shall be like Him, a real and bodily transformation into Christlikeness, not a vague afterlife.

The second doctrine is the necessary connection between this identity and a transformed life. John says plainly that those born of God do not make a practice of sin, while those who practice sin reveal that they belong to the devil. This is the doctrinally sensitive heart of the lesson, and the teacher must steer between two errors. It does not teach sinless perfection; John has already said that anyone who claims to be without sin deceives himself (1:8). Nor does it license ongoing sin on the grounds of grace. John is describing the settled direction and practice of a life: the child of God no longer lives in habitual, unrepentant sin, even though he still stumbles and is cleansed. The teacher should present this as the contrast between two ways of life, two families, two directions of travel.

Formationally, the lesson aims to awaken both wonder and holiness. Students should leave amazed that they are truly God's children and stirred by the hope of seeing Christ and being made like Him. And that very wonder and hope should drive them to purify their lives, not out of fear of losing a status they earn, but as beloved children growing into the family likeness of their Father.

Question 1

Student Question:

John urges us to "abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming" (2:28). What does this teach us about how we should live now in light of Christ's return, and what is the difference between confidence and shame at His coming?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John connects present living to future appearing. We are to abide in Christ now precisely so that His return will be a day of confidence rather than shame. The certainty of His coming is meant to shape the way we live today, not as terror but as motivation to remain faithful.

Define the two responses John sets in contrast. Confidence (the word suggests boldness, freedom of speech, the ease of one with nothing to hide) belongs to those who have been abiding in Christ. Shame, the impulse to shrink back, belongs to those who have not, who meet the Lord as those caught unprepared. The difference is not the perfection of our record but the reality of our abiding.

Address the doctrine of Christ's return briefly and soundly. John assumes a real, personal appearing of Christ for which believers must be ready. This is not a hidden, secret event or a far-off political reign; it is the open coming of the reigning Lord, the great horizon toward which the whole Christian life leans.

Apply it to daily life. Living in light of His return means making choices today that we will be glad of then. It steadies us in trials, restrains us from sin, and keeps our priorities ordered. The one who abides has nothing to dread and everything to anticipate.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The real, personal return of Christ as the horizon of the Christian life
- Abiding in Christ now as preparation for confidence at His appearing
- The contrast between confidence and shame grounded in abiding, not in a perfect record
- Present living shaped by future certainty

Discussion Prompts

- How would living in light of Christ's return change your choices this week?
- What is the difference between confidence and dread at His coming?
- Why does John tie readiness for His return to abiding rather than to perfection?

Question 2

Student Question:

John speaks of having “confidence and not shrink[ing] from him in shame at his coming” (2:28). When you honestly imagine standing before Jesus, do you lean toward confidence or toward dread, and what is that telling you about your walk with Him right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the truth of verse 28 personally. Ask students to picture, honestly, standing before Jesus. The instinctive lean of the heart, toward gladness or toward dread, is a revealing spiritual gauge.

Help them read the gauge wisely. Persistent dread may signal an area of unabiding, a sin being nursed, a relationship with God grown distant, a guilty conscience left unaddressed. The remedy is not to manufacture false confidence but to return, confess, and abide.

Guard against two distortions. One is a presumptuous confidence rooted in nothing, the careless assumption that all is well while living far from Christ. The other is a crippling dread in a faithful believer who simply has a tender or anxious conscience. The aim is the settled confidence of one who is genuinely abiding, neither presumptuous nor terrified.

Point them to the source of true confidence. It is not our performance but our abiding in Christ, who is our Advocate and our righteousness. The believer who is walking with Him can look toward that day with longing rather than fear, as a child waiting for a beloved Father.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The conscience as a gauge of our abiding, to be read wisely
- The difference between presumptuous confidence and the true confidence of abiding
- The difference between a tender conscience and genuine guilt
- Confidence grounded in Christ our Advocate, not in our performance

Discussion Prompts

- When you imagine standing before Jesus, what is your instinctive response?
- If you feel dread, is it pointing to something you need to address, or a conscience needing reassurance?
- Where does true confidence before Christ actually come from?

Question 3

Student Question:

John exclaims, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (3:1). What does it mean to be a child of God, and how does this identity differ from the common idea that everyone is automatically a child of God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the class feel John's astonishment before analyzing it. He calls his readers to stop and look, to behold what manner of love this is. To be called a child of God is to be brought into His family, to share His name, to have access to Him as Father, and to be heir of His inheritance. It is the gift of staggering, undeserved love.

Then address the common confusion directly. Our culture often says everyone is a child of God by virtue of being created. Scripture does speak of all people as God's offspring by creation (Acts 17:28), but the New Testament reserves the precious family language of children of God for

those who have received Christ and been born of God (John 1:12–13). It is a gift granted, not a birthright assumed.

Explain how one becomes a child of God: by the new birth, received as we respond to the gospel in faith, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ, by which we are clothed with Christ and become sons of God (Galatians 3:26–27). Adoption into the family is real and is entered on God's terms, not presumed by everyone automatically.

Apply it warmly. For the believer, this identity is the deepest truth about them, deeper than their failures, their reputation, or their circumstances. They are children of God, loved by the Father, and so they are. Let students rest their weight on that name.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sonship as the gift of the Father's love, received through the new birth
- The distinction between all people as God's creatures and believers as His children (John 1:12–13)
- Entry into God's family through faith, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ (Galatians 3:26–27)
- The believer's identity as a child of God as their deepest and most secure truth

Discussion Prompts

- What does it actually mean for your daily life to be a child of God?
- How does Scripture distinguish being God's creature from being God's child?
- How does this identity sit deeper than your failures or circumstances?

Question 4

Student Question:

John says the world does not know us because it did not know Christ (3:1). Where do you feel out of step with the world because you belong to God, and are you tempted to blur that difference in order to fit in?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John explains the believer's sense of not quite fitting: the world does not recognize us because it did not recognize our Father or our Lord. Feeling out of step is not a malfunction; it is a mark of belonging to Another. Help students reframe their discomfort as a sign of family resemblance, not failure.

Invite them to name where they feel the gap: in values, priorities, speech, how they spend money and time, what they celebrate and refuse. The friction is often quiet, a sense of swimming against a current that everyone else seems to ride.

Then press the temptation honestly. The pull to blur the difference, to tone down our distinctiveness so as to belong, is constant and subtle. We laugh along, stay silent, adopt the culture's assumptions, all to avoid the discomfort of standing out. Naming the specific places we compromise is the first step.

Encourage them with John's framing. The goal is not to be odd for its own sake or harshly separatist, but to wear the family likeness without embarrassment. We belong to the Father; a measure of being misunderstood by the world simply comes with the name. That difference, lovingly lived, is itself a witness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer's necessary distinctiveness from the world (John 15:18–19)
- Feeling out of step as a mark of belonging to God, not a failure
- The temptation to blur distinctiveness to gain acceptance
- Distinctiveness lived in love as a witness, not harsh separatism

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most feel out of step with the world because you belong to God?
- In what settings are you tempted to blur the difference to fit in?
- How can we be distinct without being harsh or self-righteous?

Question 5

Student Question:

John says, "what we will be has not yet appeared," but "when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (3:2). What does this teach about the Christian's hope and final destiny, and how is this different from a vague hope of merely going somewhere nice when we die?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John lifts our eyes to our destiny: when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. The Christian hope is not merely escape from this world or a pleasant afterlife; it is transformation into the likeness of Christ in His presence. We will finally and fully bear the family resemblance.

Tie this to the larger biblical hope of resurrection and glorification. Scripture promises not disembodied drifting but a transformed, glorified existence patterned after the risen Christ (Philippians 3:20–21; 1 Corinthians 15:49–53). The vague cultural picture of becoming an angel or floating on clouds falls far short of this. Our destiny is Christlikeness in resurrection life.

Note the means of the transformation: seeing Him as He is. There is something about beholding Christ in His unveiled glory that completes the work of conforming us to Him. The

transformation begun now, as we behold Him in the gospel, will be perfected then, when we see Him face to face.

Apply it to hope. This destiny gives the Christian life its direction and its courage. We are not merely waiting to die; we are being readied to be like Christ. That hope dignifies present struggle and steadies us, for the unfinished family likeness will one day be complete.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian hope as transformation into Christ's likeness, not a vague afterlife
- Resurrection and glorification patterned after the risen Christ (Philippians 3:20–21; 1 Corinthians 15)
- Beholding Christ as the means of our final conformity to Him
- Hope as the direction and courage of the present Christian life

Discussion Prompts

- How is being made like Christ a richer hope than merely going somewhere nice?
- How does our future destiny give meaning to present struggle?
- What does it mean that seeing Christ will complete our transformation?

Question 6

Student Question:

John says everyone who has this hope “purifies himself as he is pure” (3:3). What does it look like, practically, for the hope of being like Christ to be actively purifying your daily choices, rather than being a comfort you only think about at funerals?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John makes a striking claim: the hope of being like Christ does not lull us into passivity; it purifies us now. Everyone who genuinely holds this hope sets about becoming, in the present, what they will fully be in the future. Hope and holiness travel together.

Help students see why this is so. If I know I will one day be like Christ and see Him face to face, that future reshapes my present. I begin to put off what has no place in that future and to cultivate what does. The hope is not a sedative but a summons.

Make it concrete. Purifying ourselves looks like turning from specific sins, guarding what we take in, ordering our habits and relationships toward Christlikeness, and cooperating with the Spirit's work. It is active, not passive; we purify ourselves, even as we depend on God's grace to do it.

Challenge the funeral-only use of hope. Many treat the hope of heaven as a comfort reserved for grief, with no bearing on Tuesday afternoon. John says real hope works now, in daily choices.

Invite students to name one area where the hope of seeing Christ would change what they do today.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hope as an active, purifying force in the present (Titus 2:11-14)
- The believer's responsibility to purify himself, in dependence on grace
- The future likeness to Christ reshaping present priorities
- The error of treating Christian hope as relevant only to death and grief

Discussion Prompts

- What would change today if you took seriously that you will see Christ and be like Him?
- What does it mean to actively purify ourselves rather than wait passively?
- Where have you reserved Christian hope for funerals instead of daily life?

Question 7

Student Question:

John writes that the Son of God "appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin" (3:5), and "to destroy the works of the devil" (3:8). What does this teach about why Jesus came, and how do His sinlessness and His mission shape the way we understand salvation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John states the purpose of Christ's coming in two complementary ways: He appeared to take away sins, and He appeared to destroy the works of the devil. Salvation is both the removal of our guilt and the breaking of sin's power and the devil's dominion. Jesus did not come merely to forgive a record while leaving us enslaved; He came to take sin away and to dismantle the works of the evil one.

Stress the importance of His sinlessness. In Him there is no sin. Only a sinless Savior could take away the sins of others; had He any sin of His own, He would have needed a savior Himself. His spotless purity is what qualifies Him to be the offering for our sins and the pattern for our purity.

Draw out the implication for how we understand salvation. Because Jesus came to take away sins and destroy the devil's works, a salvation that left us comfortably in our sins would contradict His very mission. To be saved is to be rescued from sin, not merely from its penalty but increasingly from its grip. This sets up the verses that follow, where John insists that God's children do not go on practicing sin.

Apply it with hope. The same Lord who came to take away sins is at work taking them away in us. When we battle a stubborn sin, we are not working against the grain of the gospel but with it; Christ Himself came to destroy that very work of the devil in our lives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The twofold purpose of Christ's coming: to take away sins and to destroy the works of the devil
- The sinlessness of Christ as the ground of His atoning work
- Salvation as rescue from sin's guilt and power, not merely its penalty
- Christ's mission as the basis for the believer's war against sin

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that Jesus Himself was without sin?
- How does Christ's mission make a sin-comfortable salvation a contradiction?
- How does it encourage you that Christ came to destroy the very sins you battle?

Question 8

Student Question:

John says that everyone who abides in Christ does not keep on sinning (3:6). Where in your life have you quietly made peace with a sin, treating it as just how you are, rather than as something Christ came to take away?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses verse 6 into the conscience. We are skilled at making peace with certain sins, relabeling them as personality, weakness, or just how we are. John's words confront that comfortable truce: the one who abides in Christ does not keep on sinning.

Help students locate the truce without crushing them. Often it is a sin we have stopped fighting: a temper we excuse, a habit we manage rather than mortify, a resentment we cherish, a private indulgence we have quietly accepted. The danger is not that we still struggle but that we have stopped struggling and called surrender normal.

Connect it to the previous question. Christ came to take this very sin away. To treat it as a permanent fixture is to deny His mission in our lives. Abiding in Him means bringing the sin back under His authority rather than granting it a permanent residence.

Point the way forward gently and hopefully. The call is not to instant perfection but to break the truce: to name the sin honestly, confess it, and resume the fight in Christ's strength. The aim is a renewed direction, not a crushing despair. Christ delights to take away what we surrender to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of making peace with particular sins
- Abiding in Christ as incompatible with settled, unfought sin

- Mortification of sin as ongoing, in Christ's strength (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5)
- Renewed direction rather than despair as the goal

Discussion Prompts

- What sin have you quietly relabeled as just how you are?
- What is the difference between still struggling and having stopped struggling?
- What would it look like to break the truce and bring that sin back to Christ?

Question 9

Student Question:

John draws a sharp line: those "born of God" do not "make a practice of sinning," while those who do are "of the devil" (3:8–10). How do we rightly understand this, as describing the direction and practice of a transformed life, without turning it into either a claim of sinless perfection or a license to sin because we are forgiven?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it is genuinely sensitive, so the teacher should move carefully and clearly. John draws two families with two ways of living: the children of God, who do not make a practice of sin, and the children of the devil, who do. The whole passage hinges on understanding what he means by making a practice of sin.

First, rule out sinless perfection. John cannot mean that God's children never sin, because he has already said that anyone who claims to be without sin is self-deceived (1:8), and has provided an Advocate for when we do sin (2:1). The present tense of the verbs is important: John is describing not the occasional stumble but the habitual, settled practice of sin, a life lived in sin as its characteristic direction. The believer still falls, confesses, and is cleansed, but he does not live in sin as his home.

Second, rule out the opposite error, the license that says, since I am forgiven, ongoing sin does not matter. John could not be more direct against this: the one who keeps on practicing sin shows that he is of the devil, not of God. Grace is never a permission slip for a life of sin. The child of God has been born again, has God's seed abiding in him, and that new life produces a new direction.

Frame it, then, as the contrast of two directions of travel. Picture two people who both stumble on a road. One has set his face one way and keeps returning to the path when he falls; the other is walking the opposite direction and is at home in the ditch. Both sin, but they belong to different families and are headed different ways. John is describing the settled bent of a life, what we practice, not whether we ever fail.

Land it pastorally so no one leaves either crushed or careless. The tender believer who grieves over real sin and keeps fighting should take comfort: this passage is not describing them, and their very grief and struggle are marks of the new birth. The careless person who has made sin a comfortable practice should be soberly warned: a forgiven status is not a cover for a life of unrepentant sin. The goal is honest self-examination that drives us to abide more deeply in the Christ who came to take sin away.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The contrast between the children of God and the children of the devil, marked by the practice of sin
- Against sinless perfection: believers still sin, confess, and are cleansed (1:8; 2:1)
- Against license: ongoing, unrepentant sin reveals a heart not born of God
- The present tense as habitual practice; the issue is the settled direction of a life
- The new birth and God's seed abiding as the source of a new direction (3:9)
- Honest self-examination that comforts the struggling and warns the careless

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between stumbling into sin and making a practice of it?
- How does this passage comfort the believer who grieves over real sin?
- How does it warn the person who has grown comfortable in unrepentant sin?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this passage, from the love that names us God's children, to the hope of being like Christ, to the call to purity. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you, through this passage, into a child who more and more bears the family likeness of the Father.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the passage into one personal response. Trace the arc once more: the Father's love names us His children now; our destiny is to be like Christ when we see Him; and this hope purifies us, so that the family likeness grows. The whole passage moves from gift to growth.

Press for one specific way the family likeness is to grow. For one it may be breaking a truce with a particular sin. For another it may be living more boldly as God's child where they have been blurring the difference to fit in. For another it may be letting the hope of seeing Christ reshape a daily habit.

Frame it as formation by a loving Father, not performance for an exacting judge. We purify ourselves not to earn the name child of God but because we have been given it. The motive is love and hope, not fear of losing a status we manufacture.

Close in wonder, where John began. Encourage students to leave amazed that they are truly God's children, stirred by the hope of being like Christ, and freshly committed to bearing the family likeness. The God who named us His own is faithful to complete the resemblance He has begun.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Integration of identity, hope, and holiness as one movement
- Holiness as growth into the family likeness, motivated by love and hope
- Sanctification as the loving Father's work, not performance to earn sonship
- Assurance and wonder as the proper closing note

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this passage is Christ pressing on you most: your identity, your hope, or your holiness?
- What single way is the family likeness called to grow in you this week?
- How does being a beloved child change the motive behind your pursuit of holiness?