

How Can I Know?, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Born of God: The Marks of New Life

1 John 3:1–10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage moves from the wonder of our adoption as children of God to the marks that distinguish those genuinely born of God from those who merely profess it. The teacher should hold both together: the extravagant, adopting love of the Father, received through faith and the new birth, and the real, observable change that this new birth produces. The most sensitive doctrinal issue is John's statement that 'no one born of God makes a practice of sinning.' This must be handled with great care, distinguishing the settled, unrepentant practice of sin from the stumbling of a believer who fights, grieves, and confesses. Read alongside 1 John 1:8–10, it cannot mean sinless perfection.

For a study on assurance, this passage steers between two errors that the teacher should name directly. On one side is the presumption of 'once saved, always saved,' which treats a past new birth as an unconditional guarantee regardless of how one now lives; John ties assurance to a genuinely changed life. On the other side is the despair of the sincere struggler, who fears that because he still sins he cannot be God's child; he needs to see that his very struggle is evidence of new life. The teacher should also avoid the Calvinist reading of guaranteed perseverance, presenting instead a real transformation that does not cancel the believer's call to remain faithful.

Beyond the doctrine, aim at formation. The goal is that students both rest in the love that made them God's children and look honestly at the family resemblance growing, or stalling, in their lives, taking up neglected fights and positive practices of righteousness. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, where the new birth, the change it produces, and the two opposite errors are addressed together. Let that question carry the weight, while the rest of the lesson presses the wonder and the evidence of the new birth into the heart.

Question 1

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 what does this status reveal about the love of God toward us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the sheer wonder John feels. He does not simply state that we are God's children; he calls us to "see," to behold, the kind of love that makes it possible. To be a child of God is not a

small thing or a figure of speech. It means we have been brought into God's own family, given His name, made heirs of His promises.

Explain how one becomes a child of God. Scripture is clear that this sonship is received through faith and the new birth: as many as received Christ, He gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12), and we are sons of God through faith, having been baptized into Christ and clothed with Him (Galatians 3:26–27). It is God's gift, not our achievement, yet it is received through an obedient faith.

Note the costliness of the love behind it. John marvels at the "kind" of love this is, a love that did not merely tolerate or pity us but adopted us at the price of the Son's own life. To grasp this is to begin to find our security in the Father's love rather than in our own performance.

For assurance, this status is foundational. Before John lists any marks of the new life, he establishes the love and the relationship. Our assurance rests first on being loved and claimed by the Father, and the evidence of changed living flows from that secure place, not the other way around.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sonship: being brought into God's own family as His children and heirs
- The new birth received through faith and baptism into Christ (John 1:12; Galatians 3:26–27)
- The costly, adopting love of the Father as the ground of our status
- Assurance rooted first in the Father's love, with changed living flowing from it

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to you that God calls you His child, not merely His servant?
- How does Scripture describe the way a person becomes a child of God?
- How does resting in the Father's love change the way you pursue holiness?

Question 2

Student Question:

When you look honestly at your life over recent years, do you see a growing family resemblance to God, or a life that has stalled or drifted? Name one specific way you long to see His likeness grow in you.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks students to assess the trajectory of their lives, not a single moment. John speaks of children of God who increasingly bear their Father's likeness, so the honest question is one of direction: am I, over time, growing more like Him, or have I plateaued or drifted?

Help students avoid two errors in self-assessment. One is despair over the slowness of growth; sanctification is usually gradual, and a slow trajectory upward is still genuine growth. The other is complacency; a life that has stalled for years, comfortable and unchanged, is worth examining honestly.

Encourage them to look at specifics rather than vague impressions. Where has patience grown, or shrunk? Has love increased? Has a particular sin loosened its grip or tightened it? Concrete reflection yields truer self-knowledge than a general feeling.

Move toward hope and desire. The question ends by asking where they long to see His likeness grow. Naming that longing is itself a hopeful sign, for the desire to be more like God is something He plants in His children. Invite students to bring that longing to Him in prayer.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sanctification as a gradual, lifelong growth in the likeness of God
- Assessing the direction of one's life rather than isolated moments
- Avoiding both despair over slow growth and complacency over a stalled life
- The longing to be like God as a sign of His work within

Discussion Prompts

- Over the past few years, has your life been growing toward God or drifting?
- What concrete evidence of growth, or of stalling, can you actually name?
- Where do you most long to see God's likeness grow in you?

Question 3

Student Question:

John says, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (3:2). What does this teach about the believer's present identity and future hope?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John holds together the already and the not yet. We are God's children now, fully and truly, even though the glory of what we will become has not yet been revealed. Our present identity is settled even as our future is gloriously unfinished.

Explain the promise of being made like Christ. When He appears, we shall be like Him, fully conformed to His likeness, our transformation completed. This is the goal of the whole Christian life, and it will be brought to completion not by our striving but by seeing Him as He is.

Connect present identity to future hope. Because we are already God's children, the future is secure; the relationship established now will be brought to its glorious end. Assurance draws on both ends of this truth: we are His now, and we will be fully like Him then.

Guard against two distortions. This is not a vague hope that everyone drifts into regardless of how they live; John ties it to those who are genuinely God's children. Nor is it a future so uncertain that the believer cannot rest; John says 'we know.' The believer's future is sure, grounded in the faithfulness of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The already and not yet of the Christian life: children now, glorified hereafter
- Final conformity to the likeness of Christ at His appearing
- Present sonship as the ground of a secure future hope
- A future that is certain ('we know') yet still to be fully revealed

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that we are God's children now, even though our future glory has not yet appeared?
- How does the promise of being made like Christ shape your hope?
- How does your present identity as God's child make your future secure?

Question 4

Student Question:

John says, "Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure" (3:3). How has hope in Christ actually motivated you to pursue purity, and where might a weak or distant hope be leaving you spiritually careless?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John draws a direct line between hope and holiness: the one who truly hopes to be like Christ purifies himself now. Future hope is not an excuse for present passivity; it is a powerful motive for present purity. We become like the One we long to see.

Help students feel the logic. If we genuinely expect to stand before Christ and be made like Him, that expectation reshapes how we live today. A vivid hope makes sin look smaller and holiness look more desirable; a faint, distant hope leaves us vulnerable to drifting and compromise.

Invite honest reflection on the strength of their hope. Many believers have let the hope of Christ's appearing grow dim and abstract, crowded out by immediate concerns. Where hope fades, carelessness creeps in. Rekindling a vivid hope is itself a path to renewed holiness.

Point to the practical effect. Ask students where a stronger hope would change a current choice. The aim is not fear-driven purity but hope-driven purity, the pursuit of holiness fueled by longing to be like the Christ we will soon see.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hope in Christ as a powerful motive for present purity (3:3)
- Future expectation shaping present conduct
- The link between a fading hope and spiritual carelessness
- Hope-driven holiness rather than fear-driven striving

Discussion Prompts

- How has hope in Christ actually motivated you toward purity?
- Where might a weak or distant hope be leaving you careless?
- What would help rekindle a vivid hope of Christ's appearing?

Question 5

Student Question:

John defines sin as "lawlessness" and says Christ "appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin" (3:4–5). What do these verses teach about the seriousness of sin and the purpose of Christ's coming?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John defines sin sharply: sin is lawlessness, a setting aside of God's rightful authority and a breaking of His law. This cuts against any tendency to treat sin as a minor flaw or a matter of personal taste. Sin is rebellion against the holy God, and it is serious.

Against this dark backdrop John sets the purpose of Christ's coming: He appeared "to take away sins." The incarnation was not sentimental; it was a rescue mission aimed precisely at the lawlessness that condemns us. Christ came to deal with the very thing we are tempted to excuse.

Note the added phrase, "in him there is no sin." The One who came to take away our sin was Himself entirely without it. Only a sinless Savior could bear the sins of others; His own purity qualifies Him to be both our sacrifice and our pattern.

Draw the implication for the believer. Since Christ came to take sin away, it makes no sense for those joined to Him to make peace with the very thing He died to remove. The seriousness of sin and the purpose of the cross together call the believer toward holiness, not toward casual tolerance of sin.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin as lawlessness, rebellion against God's authority, not a minor flaw
- Christ's coming as a mission to take away sins
- The sinlessness of Christ as qualifying Him to be sacrifice and pattern
- The incoherence of making peace with the sin Christ died to remove

Discussion Prompts

- How does defining sin as lawlessness sharpen its seriousness?
- What does it mean that Christ appeared to take away sins?
- Why is it incoherent for a believer to make peace with sin Christ died to remove?

Question 6

Student Question:

Is there a sin you have stopped fighting, quietly accepting it as just part of who you are? In light of Christ's purpose to take sin away, what would it look like to take up that fight again rather than surrender to it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question confronts the surrender that can masquerade as humility. Many believers have a besetting sin they have stopped resisting, telling themselves it is simply their personality, their weakness, their unchangeable lot. John's vision of the new birth challenges that resignation.

Help students distinguish ongoing struggle from settled surrender. To stumble in a sin we are genuinely fighting is the normal experience of the Christian life. To lay down our weapons and make peace with a sin, no longer even trying, is something else, and it is worth confronting honestly.

Offer hope grounded in Christ's purpose. He came to take sins away. The believer does not fight alone or in his own strength; the Spirit works in those born of God to put sin to death (Romans 8:13). No sin is so woven into us that grace cannot begin to loosen it.

Encourage a concrete renewal of the fight. Ask students to name one surrendered area and one practical step toward resisting it again: accountability, removing a temptation, fresh prayer, a renewed daily dependence on the Spirit. The aim is to trade resignation for hopeful, dependent struggle.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of surrendering to a besetting sin as 'just who I am'
- The difference between ongoing struggle and settled surrender
- The Spirit's power to put sin to death in those born of God (Romans 8:13)
- Hopeful, dependent struggle rather than resignation

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a sin you have quietly stopped fighting?
- What is the difference between struggling against a sin and surrendering to it?
- What concrete step would help you take up that fight again?

Question 7

Student Question:

John gives a striking test: "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil... No one born of God makes a practice of sinning" (3:8-9). What is the difference between a believer who still struggles with sin and someone who "makes a practice" of it, and why does this distinction matter?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question addresses a verse that has troubled many sincere believers, so handle it with care. John says no one born of God "makes a practice of sinning." He is not saying a Christian never sins; he has already said the opposite (1:8-10). He is describing a settled pattern, a habitual, unrepentant practice of sin as the direction of one's life.

Clarify the contrast. The believer still sins, but he does not make sin his practice; he fights it, grieves it, confesses it, and turns from it. The one 'of the devil' makes sin his way of life, comfortable and unresisted. The difference is not perfection versus imperfection, but direction: toward God or toward sin.

Explain why the distinction matters for assurance. The anxious believer reads this verse and panics, fearing that because he still sins he must be 'of the devil.' He needs to see that John is describing a settled practice, not the stumbling of a fighting heart. The careless professor, by contrast, needs the warning: a life that practices sin without repentance is not the life of one born of God.

Note how the new birth makes the difference. John grounds the believer's changed pattern in his new birth: 'God's seed abides in him.' The life of God planted in the believer genuinely changes the direction of his living. This is not a guarantee that removes all responsibility, but a real transformation that shows itself in a new pattern of life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- 'Making a practice of sinning' as a settled, habitual, unrepentant pattern
- The difference between a believer who fights and stumbles and one who practices sin as a way of life
- Direction of life, not flawless perfection, as the issue (1:8-10 held alongside 3:9)
- The new birth and the abiding 'seed' of God as the source of a changed pattern

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between struggling with sin and ‘making a practice’ of it?
- Why does the anxious believer misread this verse, and how would you reassure him?
- How does the new birth actually change the direction of a person’s life?

Question 8

Student Question:

Children resemble their Father not only in avoiding wrong but in actively doing good. Where is God calling you not merely to stop a sin but to take up a positive practice of righteousness that reflects His character to those around you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns from the negative to the positive. John says the children of God ‘practice righteousness’; the family resemblance is not merely the absence of sin but the active presence of good. Holiness is not only what we avoid but what we pursue.

Help students see that a merely defensive Christianity, focused only on not sinning, falls short of the family likeness. God is generous, just, compassionate, and faithful, and His children are meant to actively reflect those qualities, not simply to keep a clean record.

Invite concrete imagination. Practicing righteousness might mean pursuing justice for someone wronged, showing generosity, speaking truth, serving the overlooked, taking initiative in reconciliation. The question asks for a positive practice to take up, not just a sin to put down.

Connect this to assurance and witness. A life actively marked by righteousness both confirms our own new birth and displays the Father’s character to a watching world. Ask students to name one positive practice of righteousness to take up in the days ahead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Practicing righteousness as the positive family resemblance of God’s children
- Holiness as active pursuit of good, not merely avoidance of sin
- Reflecting the Father’s character: justice, generosity, compassion, faithfulness
- Active righteousness as both confirmation of new birth and witness to the world

Discussion Prompts

- Where is God calling you to take up a positive practice of righteousness, not just stop a sin?
- How does a merely defensive Christianity fall short of the family likeness?
- What good could you actively pursue this week that reflects your Father’s character?

Question 9

Student Question:

John says the new birth produces a real change: God's children do not practice sin, while the children of the devil do (3:9–10). How does this passage steer between the presumption of 'once saved, always saved' and the despair of the struggling believer, and what does it teach about the assurance that flows from a genuinely changed life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson and deserves the fullest treatment. John insists that the new birth produces a real, observable change. Those born of God do not make a practice of sin; their lives bear a growing family resemblance to their Father. Assurance, then, can be confirmed by a genuinely changed life, not merely claimed.

Address the presumption of 'once saved, always saved' first. Some take their new birth as an unconditional guarantee, assuming that because they were once born again, their manner of life now cannot endanger them. But John ties the evidence of being God's child to a life that does not practice sin. A professed new birth that produces no change, or that coexists comfortably with a settled practice of sin, is exactly the false claim John writes to expose. The marks matter; profession without transformation is not enough.

Now guard against the opposite error, the despair of the sincere struggler. He reads 'no one born of God makes a practice of sinning' and fears he is lost because he still sins. Reassure him plainly: John is describing a settled practice, not the stumbling of a heart that fights, grieves, and confesses. His very struggle against sin, his grief over it, his return to God, is evidence of the new life within him. The presence of the fight is itself a mark of the new birth.

Be careful here to stay clear of the Calvinist reading. John is not teaching an irresistible, guaranteed perseverance that makes the believer's ongoing faithfulness irrelevant. He is describing the real change the new birth brings, while the rest of the New Testament makes clear that a child of God must continue in faith and can, tragically, fall away if he abandons it (a truth the study will treat fully in Lesson 11). The new birth genuinely changes us; it does not cancel our responsibility to remain faithful.

Bring it home. The settled middle is this: a genuine new birth shows itself in a changed life, and that change is real ground for assurance. The believer who sees the family resemblance growing, however imperfectly, who fights sin rather than practicing it, may rest in confident hope. The one who presumes upon a past experience while practicing sin should not rest, but should come home. Assurance flows from a life that is actually, observably becoming like the Father.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The new birth as producing a real, observable change of life

- Against 'once saved, always saved': profession without transformation is not enough (3:9–10)
- Against despair: 'practice of sin' is a settled direction, not the stumbling of a fighting believer
- Against the Calvinist guarantee of perseverance: the changed life does not cancel the call to remain faithful
- The believer's struggle against sin as itself evidence of the new birth
- Assurance confirmed by a genuinely changed life, growing in the family likeness

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage challenge the idea that a past new birth guarantees salvation regardless of how one now lives?
- How does it reassure the believer who still struggles but fights and grieves over sin?
- What is the difference between the real change John describes and a guaranteed, automatic perseverance?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this lesson on being born of God. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses, and the single truth from 1 John 3:1–10 that you most need to carry into the coming week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson and turns it toward formation. Aim for a personal response, and give students room to reflect on the trajectory of their own lives.

Listen for where each person stands. Some need to marvel afresh at being loved as God's children and to rest in that identity. Others need a candid call to take up a fight they have surrendered, or to examine a profession that has produced little change. The same passage speaks to each.

Encourage something concrete: a surrendered sin to fight again, a positive practice of righteousness to take up, or a phrase from verse 1 or verse 3 to hold onto. The new life grows as it is lived.

Point forward. Having seen the marks of those born of God, the next lesson turns to confidence before God, how the believer can quiet an accusing heart and draw near to the Father with boldness. Reassure the class that the path leads further into grounded assurance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation as the goal of the study, not merely information
- The same passage reassuring the loved child and challenging the unchanged professor

- New life grown through being actively lived
- The marks of the new birth as foundation for the confidence before God that follows

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from this lesson you most need to carry this week?
- Where is Jesus inviting you to rest in your identity as a beloved child of God?
- Where is He calling you to take up a fight or a practice of righteousness you have neglected?