

## **“Two Fathers, Two Practices, Two Paths”**

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It's Father's Day, so let me begin with a word about parenting. Many of you have children and you know that one of the most interesting things about being a parent is learning how your children resemble you. Most of you know we have two sons, Caleb and Simon. When Caleb was born, it was interesting to see that he had dirty blond hair. I guess I was a bit surprised by that, because Kathy and I have brown hair. When Simon was born, Kathy was surprised to see he had dark hair. I guess she got used to Caleb's hair color. Neither of us were surprised that they have blue eyes, since we both have blue eyes. But what's even more interesting than that is to see how our sons are similar to us in more subtle ways. I'm talking about their personalities, their aptitudes, and their behaviors.

For example, Caleb is a lot like me in some ways. He memorizes things well. He's good with numbers. He's a pretty bright kid. He seems to have some musical talent that he may develop some day. There are also some not-so-positive traits of mine that he shares. He can be obsessive. He's intense. He's sensitive. He's argumentative. And then there are ways that he isn't like me at all. He's more outgoing. He says “hi” to strangers and gives them hugs. Sometimes, when he's being difficult, Kathy and I joke and say, “Whose kid is this?” or, “That's your son.”

Many of us have children who resemble us in one way or another. But all of resemble a parent. We may resemble our father or our mother, or both in different ways. Yet the Bible teaches about a greater resemblance. All of us will resemble one spiritual father or another. We will either resemble the heavenly Father or the father of hell. That is, we'll either resemble God or the devil. And that resemblance will shape how we live and where our lives are going.

We'll see all of this in today's passage, 1 John 3:4–18. If you haven't been with us recently, we've been going through the book of 1 John, a letter written by one of Jesus' first followers, the apostle John. John was writing towards the end of his long life, probably to churches in the area of Ephesus, which is in the western part of modern-day Turkey. He was writing to these churches because there were false teachers, people who were teaching different messages about Jesus (1 John 4:1). Some of these people had been in these churches but had left because “they were not of us” (1 John 2:19). They had “the spirit of antichrist” (1 John 2:18; 4:3). It seems John wanted to reassure his readers that the message they heard at first, the true

gospel, was indeed true. It was the message of the apostles, those men who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. These were the men commissioned by Jesus to go and spread the good news about him.

So, with that in mind, let's read the entire passage first, and then I'll go back and explain three things we see: there are two fathers, two practices, and two paths.

<sup>4</sup> Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup> You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup> No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. <sup>7</sup> Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup> Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

<sup>11</sup> For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. <sup>12</sup> We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. <sup>13</sup> Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. <sup>14</sup> We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. <sup>15</sup> Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

<sup>16</sup> By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. <sup>17</sup> But 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? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

That's a longer section of text than we've usually been looking at each week. It's hard to divide up the text of 1 John. Of course, as in any letter, all of the text is connected. But John's letter is harder to break up into smaller pieces because his thoughts seem to cycle back on previous material, then move ahead, and then cycle back. But I think this passage has three main themes.

In this passage, John is drawing a distinction between two types of people, two ways of living, and two paths that lead to two different destinations. In this way, this passage reminds me of the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. There, Jesus says there are false prophets, which implies there are true prophets, too. He says there are two types of trees, which produce either good fruit or bad fruit (Matt. 7:15–20). There are people who even call Jesus "Lord" and who

will not enter the kingdom of heaven, even though they have done some impressive things in his name. That is because they weren't known by Jesus—that's a way of saying they didn't have a right relationship with him—and they were “workers of lawlessness” (Matt. 7:21–23). Jesus also says there are two types of people, those who build their houses on the solid foundation of the rock and those who build their houses on shifting and unstable sand. The first group will survive the storm but the second group won't (Matt. 7:24–27). What he means is that there are people who will believe in him and follow him, and there are people who reject him and won't obey him.

John, like his Teacher, shows that there are divergent paths. And perhaps he uses a bit of hyperbole, exaggerating the differences to make a point. He wants us to ask ourselves which kind of person we are, and what kind of path we're on.

I want us to see three things that he emphasizes. The first in terms of importance is that there are two types of fathers. There are children of God and then there are children of the devil. Look again at verses 8–10:

<sup>8</sup> Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

There are children of God and children of the devil. Now, let me clarify something in case you've never heard this before. John doesn't mean that there are people who are literally the “spawn of Satan.” He doesn't mean the devil is like an incubus, impregnating women in the night who later have demon children. Get all ideas from *Rosemary's Baby* out of your head. John is talking about biological children. What John has in mind is resemblance. Children of God resemble God and children of the devil resemble Satan.

People become children of God when they receive the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:14–17; Gal. 4:1–7), and have faith in Jesus. They are united to Jesus, the true Son of God, and therefore are regarded as God's children. They're adopted into his family. And what do they do? Look at verse 9: “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.” Earlier, in

verse 6, John writes, “No one who abides in him keeps on sinning.” Later, John will talk about love as a mark of a child of God.

Does this mean real Christians never sin, and if you’ve ever sinned, you’re not a Christian? If that were so, we’d all be in trouble. It also wouldn’t make sense of 1 John 1:8: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” And then, two verses later: “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1:10). It seems the best way to understand what John is saying is that a Christian will not be dominated by sin. His or her life will not be identified by sin, particularly the kind of lawlessness that John writes about.

Remember, John is warning about false beliefs in this letter. It seems that the false Christians didn’t acknowledge who Jesus is (2:22; 4:3). They probably said that they didn’t have a sin problem. They surely had some ethical issues. And they probably didn’t express real love for Christians. Those are the kind of sins John has in mind.

But real Christians confess their sin. They trust that Jesus is the sinless Christ, the Son of God, who died for our sins. They live in community with fellow Christians, loving them. In other words, they’re part of a local church. And they make a practice of living according to God’s design for our lives.

The children of the devil, on the other hand, live differently. Look at verse 8: “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.” What is sin? Look back to verse 4: “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.” Lawlessness is rebellion. And that rebellion can be obvious. It’s obvious that an atheist is in rebellion against God. But sometimes very religious people can be rebellious, too. In Matthew 23, during the last week of Jesus’ life before he died and rose from the grave, he rebuked the religious leaders of Jerusalem, the scribes and the Pharisees. They were hypocrites. They wanted to appear as though they obeyed all the laws of God, even down to the smallest details. And they added manmade laws to the laws of God. In fact, they paid greater attention to the manmade laws than to God’s laws. But they didn’t really love God and love other people. Jesus called them “hypocrites” and “whitewashed tombs,” because they looked nice on the outside but were spiritually dead on the inside. Then, he said, “So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt. 23:28).

John's words about the children of the devil call to mind what Jesus says in John's Gospel. In John 8, Jesus once again confronts the Jewish religious leaders of his day. He says some amazing things to them. He says, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also" (v. 19). He says, "I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins" (v. 24; cf. vv. 28, 58). "I am he" is a reference to God (Isa. 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 46:4; 47:8, 10; 48:12). Jesus is saying that unless they believe that he is God, they would stand condemned. He tells them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (v. 34). He says, "you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you" (v. 37). Jesus tells them they were "doing the works your father did" (v. 41), that they would have loved him if God was their father (v. 42), but the reality was they couldn't stand to hear his words (v. 43). And then Jesus drops the hammer on them: "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 does not stand in 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" (v. 44).

That's a reference to Satan, of course. And it recalls what he did in the beginning: He lied to Eve about God's character and what would happen when she ate the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3). Because of Adam and Eve's sin, death entered into the world (Rom. 5:12). So, Satan is a liar and a murderer. Satan doesn't trust God. He can't stand to hear God's words and obey them. He lies, he accuses (Rev. 12:10), he murders, he wants to destroy God's people and thwart God's plans.<sup>1</sup>

So, if we put all this together, we get the following: People who don't acknowledge that Jesus is God, who hate God's word, who don't trust that God is good, who lie, who murder, who are opposed to God's plans, these are people who resemble Satan. And in that sense, they are his children. They are practicing lawlessness. They are in rebellion against God.

I've said this before, there is no neutrality. Either we're in a relationship with God through Jesus, anointed by the Holy Spirit, and resembling our Father, or we're resembling the devil and coming under his influence. That doesn't mean that non-Christians are demonic or as bad as they could be. But, at the end of the day, you are either with Jesus or against him (Matt. 12:30).

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<sup>1</sup> See also Job 1-2; Zech. 3:1-5; Matt. 4:1-11; 16; 21-23; Luke 22:3, 31; Acts 5:3.

And, depending on who our spiritual father is, our lives will be filled with one practice or another. We will either hate or love. The child of the devil “practices lawlessness” (v. 4) and “keeps on sinning” (v. 6). He doesn’t “practice righteousness” or “love his brother” (v. 10). John gives us an example from the Old Testament: Cain. In verse 12, he writes, “We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.” And he’s not just speaking about literal murder. In verse 15, he writes, “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer,” which is similar to something that Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21–22).

Cain was Adam and Eve’s firstborn son, who killed his brother Abel because he was jealous of him. The author of Hebrews says that Abel “offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain” (Heb. 11:4), apparently because Abel had faith in God. God accepted Abel’s sacrifice “but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry” (Gen. 4:6). God warned him about sin. He said that if Cain did well, he would accept his sacrifice. But if he did not do well, sin would devour him (Gen. 4:7). And we know the story: Cain didn’t listen to God. Instead, he killed his brother. He proved that he was the “seed of the serpent.” He wasn’t “God’s seed.”

We don’t have to be as evil as Cain to be a child of the devil. We can simply hate someone. Hating someone is wishing in our heart that a person was dead. It’s acting as if the world would be better off if that person didn’t exist. We can hate people by ignoring their needs, particularly our brothers and sisters in Christ. Look at verses 17 and 18: “But 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.” This is similar to what James writes in James 2:15–17:

<sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? <sup>17</sup> So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

It’s not enough to wish people well. We also need to act to help them if we can. If we say things and never act, we’re hypocrites. Inwardly, we’re full of lawlessness. James would say that our faith is dead, not real faith at all.

The opposite of Cain is Jesus. Look at verse 16: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” Cain hated God and hated

his brother. So, he laid his brother's life down. Jesus has always loved God the Father and he loves his brothers and sisters, so he laid down his life for them. He did that because it was the only way for us to be reconciled to God. The fact is that all of us start out this life a child of the devil. Again, that doesn't mean we're Rosemary's baby or even as evil as we possibly could be. But we don't start out loving God, trusting him, and obeying him. Therefore, we need someone to take care of our rebellion, our sin. God's perfect justice demands that injustice is punished. And to be a child of God, we need to appear as sinless in his eyes. Jesus came to live the life that we don't live and to die the death that we deserve. Look at verse 5: "You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin." Jesus never sinned (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22). Yet he died as if he was the worst of criminals. On the cross, he absorbed God's wrath, which is what sin deserves. It's a spiritual pain that we can't imagine. He did that "to take away sins" of everyone who has a right relationship with him, who trusts in him, who is united to him by the power of God.

That's how Jesus "destroy[s] the works of the devil" (v. 8). Satan, who is jealous of God the way Cain was jealous of Abel, has always wanted to disrupt God's plans. God made human beings to worship him and obey him, like loving children obey a perfect father. Satan helped lead humanity into sin. He lies to keep them sinning and in rebellion against God. And he accuses us of our sin, making us feel the guilt and shame of our wrongdoing. He tries to devour us.

Satan thought that he could stop God's plans by destroying God's Son. He played a large role in having Jesus die on the cross. Yet, ironically, it was Jesus' death (and resurrection) that destroyed Satan's works. And one day, Jesus will return to put an end to Satan.

There are pastors who play movie clips in their sermons. I'm not that kind of guy. But there are times when movies, or novels, or television shows, capture the essence of what Jesus did on the cross. Sometimes, stories powerfully depict great truths of the Christian faith, even when the storytellers themselves aren't Christians. I suppose they can't help doing this, since they live in God's world. One movie that powerfully depicts something of Jesus' sacrifice is a movie called *Gran Torino*, which was directed by Clint Eastwood.

In that movie, Eastwood plays the role of Walt. The story is set in Detroit, which is a long way from its glory years. Walt used to work for Ford, he served in the Korean War, and his wife has just died. He lives alone with a dog in a well-kept house that's in the middle of a crumbling and changing neighborhood. Walt is a misanthrope. He generally seems to hate people. He uses

foul language. And he's a racist. He says all kinds of racial slurs against his Asian neighbors. He's a crusty old guy, sort of like how you would imagine Dirty Harry might turn out to be in his retirement years if he got a bit more bitter.

Walt's neighbors are Asian. They are actually Hmong people. A grandmother, her widowed daughter, and her two children live in the house next door to Walt. The two children, who are probably in their teenage years, are Sue and Thao. They have a cousin who is in a gang. Thao's cousin tries to recruit him into the gang, even rescuing Thao from another gang. As a rite of initiation, the gang asks Thao to steal Walt's prized possession: a 1972, mint-condition Gran Torino. Thao tries to steal the car but he gets caught in the act by Walt, who is brandishing a rifle. Thao runs off.

Later, the gang comes back to get Thao to join the gang once again. His sister, Sue, and her family try to step in, but the gang won't give up. This causes a scene. Walt walks out of his house, carrying the rifle again. He scares the gang off. Thao's family thinks he's a hero. And eventually he develops a relationship with this family. He teaches Thao how to use some tools and he gets him a construction job.

But the gang won't leave Thao alone. They attack him and break his tools. When Walt finds out, he catches one of the gang members alone and beats him and warns him to leave Thao alone. But the gang still won't quit. They drive by Thao's house and shoot it up. Thao's sister, Sue, wasn't home at the time. Later, she returns to the house. She is severely beaten and also raped.

Walt is sick. He's in a rage. Throughout the movie, he has an antagonistic relationship with a young priest. Walt's late wife was a Catholic and wanted to see Walt come to faith. Walt tells this priest, "Thao and Sue are never going to find peace in this world, as long as that gang's around. Until they go away, you know, forever." Thao agrees. He wants revenge. He finds Walt cleaning his guns and he assumes they're going to go together to attack the gang.

Walt brings Thao into his basement. He shows him the Silver Star he earned in the Korean War. He says he killed at least thirteen men in the war. When Thao asks Walt what it's like to kill a man, Walt says, "You don't want to know." Then he locks Thao in his basement. He says he still remembers killing a young Korean by shooting him in the face. He says, "There's not a day goes by that I don't think about it and you don't want that on your soul. I've got blood on my soul. I'm soiled. That's why I'm going it alone tonight."

Walt gives his dog to Thao's grandmother and later calls Sue to tell her where his keys are, so she can unlock Thao. Then Walt heads to the gang's house. When he shows up, they open the door and Thao's cousin draws a gun on Walt. As they talk, some neighbors hear what's happening and start watching these men. Walt confronts them, saying that one of them raped someone in their own family, their "own blood." Thao's cousin draws a gun on Walt. Walt says, reminiscent of Dirty Harry, "Go ahead." Walt puts a hand into his pocket, and the gang members get ready to shoot. He says, "Kind of jumpy, aren't we?" He points his finger at them like it was a gun and "air shoots" them. He then pulls out a cigarette and says, "Got a light?" He puts it in his mouth. Then he says, "Me? I've got a light." He puts his hand into his jacket pocket and the gang shoots him several times. As he falls down dead, it is revealed that he had a lighter in his hand. He is laid out in a cruciform position, his legs together, his arms extended to the sides.

A few minutes later, when police have already arrived, Thao and Sue pull up in the Gran Torino. Thao asks an officer what happened. The officer says, "This time we have witnesses. These guys will be locked up for a long time."

Walt knew that Thao and Sue could never live in that neighborhood if the gang was still there. He could have gone all Dirty Harry on them. But he didn't want Thao to have that on his soul. So, he did something else. He laid down his life so that Thao and Sue could go free, and so the sons of the devil could be captured. We know he did this on purpose because he finally went to the priest to make a confession beforehand, and he bought a suit to be buried in.

That is, in a way, what Jesus did on the cross. Of course, Eastwood's character wasn't sinless. Far from it. And he didn't die for the sins of his neighbors. But he did lay down his life. He sacrificed himself.

And that's what we ought to do for one another. Again, we can't die for each other's sins. And we don't need to do that. Jesus' death is the only sacrifice we need for sins. But when we sacrifice our time, our comfort, our money, our energy, and even our personal preferences for the sake of others, we're laying down our lives for one another.

So, there are two spiritual fathers, God or the devil, and their children will adopt one of two practices, love or hate, righteousness or lawlessness. And everyone is on two paths that will lead to one destination or another. We see this in verses 14 and 15: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal

life abiding in him.” We will either be on the path to eternal life or eternal death. Those who reject Jesus and resemble the devil will be condemned, removed from God’s world, cast out into outer darkness. In other words, they will be in hell. But those who are adopted by God into his family, who receive the free offer of salvation, will live forever.

That path of eternal life may not always be easy. In verse 13, John writes, “Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.” That’s exactly what Jesus taught (John 15:18–25). The children of the devil may very well hate us the way Cain hated Abel. But Christians should be different. We should love each other, and that love should be evident (John 13:34–35; 15:9–17).

So, what does this have to do with us? First, this passage should clarify the difference between Christians and non-Christians. There is no such thing as a Christian who doesn’t abide in Christ, who doesn’t generally obey him, and who doesn’t love other Christians and serve them. That doesn’t mean that Christians are perfect, but our lives should be marked by obedience. And that obedience is motivated by love. We lay down our lives for others because Jesus laid down his life for us.

And I should say this: The Christian life isn’t just about doing nice things for others. We should realize that loving and worshiping God are moral actions. If a person doesn’t do these things, they aren’t living a righteous life. We’re not reconciled to God and saved from condemnation by being nice, or by doing good works. We’re saved from sin and death because God is good and has given us the gift of Jesus. If you have that gift, though, you not only love your neighbor as yourself, but you love God with your whole being (Matt. 22:34–40).

Here’s a second thing: Be a fountain, not a drain. Be a fountain, not a drain. That is, be someone who is giving, not someone who is taking. Be someone who gives life, not sucks it away. That doesn’t mean we have to go around with grins on our faces or be “happy.” But we should love people in such a way that we point them to the source of life, the source of love, the source of goodness and beauty and truth. When we point people to Jesus, and we love them as Jesus loved us, we are being fountains. When we hate people, lie to them, use them, exploit them, covet what they have, we’re being drains. We’re being like Cain. We’re being like Satan. Be a fountain, not a drain. Be like Jesus, not like Cain.

Here's a third point: Who do you resemble? What do you practice? What path are you on? We should take this seriously and ask ourselves these questions. I find the call to love and to lay down my life convicting. I know I'm not doing this as I should. What are you doing?

If we do trust Jesus and love and obey him somewhat, we should ask God to give us strength to obey Jesus more. We should ask God to help us love him and love others. And then we should act.

But there may be some here who aren't Christians. And I want to tell you that God is the source of everything good. He is the author of life. He is source of goodness and the measure of righteousness. His word is the standard of truth. He is beautiful. You want to resemble him. But the only way that he can be your father is to admit that you've resembled the devil. You've ignored God. You may have outright hated him. You couldn't bear to hear his words. You didn't listen to him and obey him. You've been selfish and haven't loved others the way you should. This is true for all of us.

But the good news is that Jesus laid down his life for sinners, people who don't deserve that kind of sacrifice. And you can receive it by turning to Jesus for help, by trusting him, by believing that he is God and our only hope and help. And when you are united to Jesus, you start to walk in his footsteps. Jesus came to take away sins, and he can take away yours so that you can be adopted into God's family and have eternal life.