

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – April 15, 2018

[1st John 3:1-7](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions on 1st John 3:1-7

1. What does it really mean to be a “child of God”? How is that (or is it?) different than simply being a human being?
2. How is a Christian’s being “unknown” by the world (v. 1) like other forms of alienation from the world? How is it different?
3. If we are children of God now (v.2a), then what will we be when “he is revealed” (v. 2b)?
4. v. 6 says that “No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.” What do you make of this verse? Can any human being be without sin? If not, does this verse suggest that no one can “abide” in God or know God?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on 1st John 3:1-7 (From *Homiletics*; "Favorite Child" – April 15, 2018)

The third chapter of the first epistle of John begins with exhortations to the epistle's audience concerning behaviors to adopt. The first of these exhortations is the simple command to observe the sheer immensity of the Father's love. The noun "love" is quite common throughout the NT, and it is especially prevalent here in 1 John, where it appears 14 times in just the five short chapters of the epistle. Despite the use of this very common word, however, the author also uses the far rarer word *ποταπην* (occurring only six other times in the NT) to describe this love. The NRSV's rather bland translation "what" loses the sense of amazement that often accompanies the word elsewhere. In the word's appearance in Matthew 8:27, for example, the disciples' exclamation in response to Jesus' calming of the storm is translated "what sort of" and is more helpful in conveying the sense of wonderment that accompanies this word. Thus, in its use in this context of 1 John 3, this single word hints at the magnitude of love about which the author writes.

It is this immense love that allows the author to assert that "we" are children of God. Notably, the *anarthous* "children of God" (*τεκνα θεου*) rather than the *articular* "the children of God" is used here. Although the point should not be pushed too far, it is possible that the author intended to suggest that the "we" is not the only group to whom the title "children of God" belongs. In a similar vein, although the author frequently addresses his audience as "children" (2:14, 18) and "little children" (2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21), he reserves the term "Son" for Jesus alone (1:3, 7, 3:23; 4:15, etc.).

References to Jesus are common throughout the epistle, but it nonetheless remains unclear whether it is Jesus the Son or God the Father who is intended by the "him" at the end of verse 1. If the author of the epistle shares theology in common with the author of the gospel, then the claim that the world "did not know him" could easily refer to either Father or Son as both possess knowledge of the other (John 10:15). Likewise in verse 2, it is not clear if the "he" whom "we will be like" is the Son (a likely choice) or God the Father (the nearest antecedent at the beginning of verse 2). Trying to differentiate, however, may be needlessly fastidious and could result in a distinction that the writer does not see a need to make. The epistle writer may understand the relationship between Father and Son to be so fluid as to negate the need for differentiation. (In this vein, the following commentary retains the rather ambiguous "he" without specifying Father or Son.)

Verse 3 marks a change in the discourse from the first person plural "we" statements that have predominated so far in this chapter to the third person singular (though, likely for the sake of inclusivity, the NRSV changes the masculine singular to a plural in the English). The Greek construction here (*paz + o + present tense participle*) will be repeated twice more in verses 4 and 6, but this identical construction in the Greek is lost in the NRSV, which uses three different methods of translating each construction ("all," "everyone," "no one"). Nevertheless, the change from the first person plural to the third person singular here is likely little more than rhetorical. In fact, a few manuscripts have evidence of a shift from the first person plural to the second person plural in verse 1, as well as shifts from the second person plural to the first person plural in verse 5. Regardless of the grammatical person, the effect is more or less the same: to encourage the epistle's audience to pursue purity. The notion of being pure in oneself because he is pure is familiar from the divine refrain in Leviticus: "Be holy, for I am holy" (11:44, 19:2, 20:7).

Verse 4 opens with the same construction as verse 3, but it expresses a radically different sentiment. The pairing of "lawlessness" (*ανουμια*) and "sin" (*αμαρτια*) is so well-attested in the Septuagint (see especially Psalm 32:1 [31:1 LXX] and 51:2 [50:4 LXX]) that the two are practically interchangeable. That the author of 1 John feels a need to explicate this relationship, however, suggests that the words' synonymous quality has likely been lost by the time he is writing. However, despite the equation of sin with lawlessness, it is not clear exactly what is intended by the latter term here, given that the epistle lacks any reference to the Torah.

The equation of lawlessness to sin, however, allows the author to transition to the next point in verse 5 that he was revealed in order "to take away sins." The vocabulary here is reminiscent of the Baptist's heralding proclamation of Jesus in the gospel as the one "who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The author of the epistle, however, makes it clear that despite Jesus' role of taking away sin, he

himself lacks sin. The present tense verb here ("is," εστιν) could carry a continuous sense which may reflect the perennial quality and state of sinlessness.

The grammatical construction used at the beginning of verses 3 and 4 appears again here in verse 6. Unlike the previous verses, though, verse 6 presents a rather significant interpretive problem. At face value, the verse seems to be a simple statement of fact: The person abiding in him does not sin. However, in 1:8, the author has already stated that the one claiming *not* to sin is simply deceiving himself or herself. If the reader accepts 1:8 as a statement of universal sin, then the natural conclusion from 3:6 would seem to be that no one actually abides in him. The absurdity of this conclusion suggests that another interpretation might be preferred. While verse 6 could still be read as a statement of fact, it may be intended to carry with it a hortatory flavor which implies the double imperative, "Remain in him! Do not sin!"

Finally, in verse 7, the author notes that it is the quality of one's actions which determine one's own quality in terms of righteousness. As in verse 3, a verse which encouraged purity because of his purity, so too here in verse 7 the author exhorts his audience to righteousness because he is righteous. Thus, while covering much ground in these verses, the author's primary purpose here seems to be the instruction of his audience in proper conduct and behavior as a Christian community.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).