

# Braided Together & Asking God's Blessings

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There's a lot of questioning of identity these days. For example, which kind of republican is a real republican – is it Steven Bannon, Paul Ryan, Donald Trump? What's American or patriotic – standing, sitting, kneeling, as a team, not as a team? It also happens at a Christian level. What's Christian – going to church, being pro-gay, anti-abortion?

Sometimes the questioning leads to condemnation inwardly and perhaps that's even appropriate in some ways. You don't need to raise your hand on this next question either but have you ever seen someone do something, where you thought,

"What a turkey they are"? "What a scoundrel." And then you add, "A Christian doesn't do that ... I don't think they are really one at all."

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It's true out there with others but also true in here with ourselves. You don't need to raise your hand on this question but just think about it. Have *you* ever done something where you thought, "What a turkey I am"? "What a scoundrel." And then you add, "I'm a pitiful example of being a Christian ... maybe I am not really one at all."

Is he or isn't he? Am I or am I not? In the Bible the author of our text today helps us with these searching, real, and important questions.

## Pray Read

Is he or isn't he? Am I or am I not? These are give-us-pause questions and we, I suspect because this is the nature of our current culture, and that affects our thinking, are quickly saying, "Judge not lest ye be judged." While still completely loving this is not exactly what John, our author under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, does or says for us to do.

John is a brilliant man. He walked with Jesus and was in his inner circle. He has lived many decades as a follower of Jesus and as a pastor. He's paid his dues and he's paid the price. The image from tradition that is associated with John is the eagle and I think we could say that is because his thought process soars so wonderfully and powerfully high.

Not in spite of his brilliance but because of it he give us a simple but not simplistic test. So when the first century person was in their town square listening to someone, who seemed learned and in-the-know, preaching on the equivalent of a cigar box and equating Jesus with Zeus or offering Jesus as a magic power that really delivers when you add this snake oil for \$5.99, how do you know what's right and wrong ... especially if you don't know that much and don't have a New Testament to turn to because it hasn't been written? (This is one of the reasons the Bible came into being as pastors like John helped with matters like this.)

And then today when your grandson points to a fallen church leader and says, "Grandad, is that Christian?" how do you answer? And when your own conscience hisses to yourself because you've flashed out in anger or in

Just saying, “You’re no Christian,” is there an answer to guide you?

John, not interested in being mean at all but in helping with truth so we may live better lives, gives a simple but not simplistic answer. He doesn’t endorse burying your head in the sand. His answer is one that is high on plain common sense, enough to satisfy someone from the “Show Me” state.

Most everything in life gets defined by qualities so we say if it swims like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, it’s a \_\_\_\_\_ (duck!). What swimming, walking, and quacking are to a duck, we find John says right experience, right belief, and right practice is to a Christian. If it doesn’t swim, walk, or quack like a duck, it’s not a duck and that’s not being judgmental. It’s common sense calling it as it is.

For many weeks now twenty or so of us have been studying I John and before leaving it I wanted to give us a sermon from it. One of the most repeated words is “know” and one of the most repeated phrases “this is how we know who is and who isn’t ...” and I’ll sum it up for you ... who is and who isn’t a Christian. His answer: *right experience, right belief, and right practice*. Let’s look at this further.

**Right Experience.** John talks about the experience of being born of God (eg., 2:29, 5:1), of being anointed with the Spirit (eg., 2:20, 3:24), of being taught by the Spirit and testified to about Jesus by the Spirit (eg., 2:20; 3:24; 4:6; 5:6), of God living in us (4:12, 16), of passing from death to life (eg., 3:14), of knowing and relying on God (eg., 4:16), of

confidence and reassurance (eg., 3:20-21, 4:17-18, 5:5, 5:14). These are things experienced.

A couple of visitors were in a very traditional church and they were raising their hands and calling out, “Amen,” along the way (which I personally like). The head usher went up to them and said, “What are you guys doing??” They answered, “We’ve got religion.” He said, “Not here, you didn’t.”

John’s talking about something of a different caliber and he talks about it with several synonyms – born, anointed, testified to, confidence – to help us identify it. Maybe one word helps more than other and maybe they all together say it.

A few weeks ago I saw my grandson on his #1 birthday. I watched him devour animal crackers and crawl furiously. When you’re born, a sign of life is appetite and desires. John says, Christians have a sense of new desires. Have you experienced spiritual desire related to Jesus?

I’ll be doing something and I catch myself saying, “That’s just like my father.” When I say that I am having an experience that ties me to the fact that I was born, I am living, and I am related to a specific father. John says, Christians have a sense of being born of The Father, of God. Do you catch yourself being like Jesus?

John talks about Jesus living in us. A pregnant woman has a sense of a particular and personal life inside of her. This happens for Christians.

I have a young adult son who lives in my house that I will go for days without seeing because of our schedules but I experience him being there because of the close of a

door at night, shoes at the door, clothes drying in the dryer. This happens for Christians – a sound, an activity showing Jesus is inside. Have you felt Jesus move in you?

John talks about an anointing and this means a combination of understanding, of being empowered, of being guided, of being connected. Have you found this in your experience?

In the end it is one thing to know the molecular formula for honey and another thing to have tasted it. John tells us Christians have *tasted* God through Jesus Christ. Have you tasted Jesus?

**Right Beliefs.** I remember sitting in the Oasis Café in San Antonio umpteen years ago and a man came in and saw me with my Bible. He exclaimed, “That’s not a KJV!” Further, that I had succumbed to the devil in not holding to the true KJV word of God. I’m sure he could have gone on to grill me about whether creation happened in seven 24 hour days and whether the earth is 4000 years old and the size of the whale in Jonah and what I thought of the virgin birth.

John doesn’t go through a KJV type litmus test of beliefs. But he does say unequivocally that beliefs are important. Beliefs have to do with reality and how you conduct yourself. You wouldn’t be sitting in that chair you are now sitting in if you didn’t believe that it would hold you. Beliefs help us act with respect to reality.

However, beliefs don’t always get reality right. Just because you believe that NYC does not exist does not mean that in reality it does not exist. It does *whether you believe it or not*. Further, if going there means saving your life and you do not believe that it exists and therefore you

will not go, the consequences are that you will not save your life.

John tells us that one who gets it that Jesus is God's son is a Christian and one who doesn't isn't. A person who doesn't can be a nice person from whom many things can be learned but they are not a Christian. John tells us that one who understands, perceives, trusts as sound that Jesus actually lived and is the Christ, the Son of God *is* a Christian and the person who does not *is not*. John points to Jesus in his five-chapter letter as the Son of God, the Life, the Atoning Sacrifice, the Purifier, the Destroyer of the works of the devil, and the one who shows us what love is. This is the center mass of knowledge that a person takes as reality and that makes him or her a Christian.

Many admire Jesus as a holy man, a good teacher, even a prophet but conclude that he is not the Son of God. One thing is clear – Christians are not saying the same thing. He either is or he is not the Son of God. NYC is there or it is not.<sup>1</sup> It is not both there and not there in reality. That's not the way reality works. Jesus in reality either is or is not. Do you believe that he is?

**Right Practice.** The mother looked out in the back yard where her little daughter was playing with the neighbor's little boy and she looked to see the girl banging the toy truck down on the head of the little boy and saying, "I do to have the love of Jesus in my heart!"

There's a connection between belief and practice. Just espousing something, as like the little girl, is not

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<sup>1</sup> Me liking NYC and you not liking NYC is a different level of question than whether it exists or not.

enough in itself. John has said that since Jesus is the light, followers of Jesus walk in the light. Jesus is truth, the followers of Jesus are truthful. Jesus loves, the followers of Jesus love. It just is incongruent to say follow Jesus as the Sin Destroyer, and coddle sin. Or walk in the dark. Or lie. Or hate.

A few summers back I was at a niece's wedding and went to pick up at the train station a family friend named Caleb. I hadn't seen Caleb since I was seven or eight years old. Anyway, we found each other and pondered how it had been fifty years since we had seen each other. When we arrived at the wedding, my son Logan ran by the car we were getting out of. He was maybe ten at the time. Caleb said, "Oh my. Him. That's how you looked when I last saw you. Is that your son?"

There's something to the DNA. If you have been born of God, you're going to look like God. Not physically necessarily but there will be a likeness.

Walk behind a family and you can see that their gate is alike. Talk to them about values, like a penny saved is a penny earned, and you'll find they got it from their parents. In Father & Son businesses, the sons have the skills and gained them from the father. So it is, says John, with God and his children. They look and act similarly.

John boils that looking and acting alike down to one, living above board and trying to be like Jesus, and two, loving like Jesus. If these aren't happening, the genuine article isn't there.

John will say that all this is ... well, a book title says it the way John would say it, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. There may be a misstep here or there. But a

misstep is not everyday walking in that path. (Otherwise you wouldn't call it a "misstep" but a "step".) The long path, when a person really is a Christian, is in the direction of being like Christ in values, attitudes, and practices.

No one is perfect. We always deal with, as Martin Luther said, being simultaneously saints *and* sinners. Use John's three fold tests when you're on the session and you need to say yes or no to someone being in the pulpit. There are times when you may need to render a judgment with respect to others. Always do so with humility and love. Leave final judgments in God's hand. He is the one who will do what is right.

But also use John's threefold test as things to pray for for yourself and others. And use it to reassure yourself – do I believe in Jesus? Have I sensed him here or there in my life? Is there a goodness that I want to be present and I am finding at least a little bit present? Then, dear friend, trust that you are a Christian.

Walk humbly, bravely, with common sense and trusting yourself and the world into the hands of our good God. The word of the Lord.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.*

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