

Not What We Appear
All Saints' Day (Observed)
November 5, 2023
1 John 3:1-3

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. (1 John 3:2)

Dear Friends in Christ,

This morning I would like to look at this text from 1st John from two perspectives – first, according to the Law of God, and secondly, from the Gospel of Christ.

I. According to the Law

According to God's Law, you're not who you appear to be.

If you want to be technical about it, we teach that God's Law operates in part as a curb: it discourages evil from happening. In other words, you know better than to say some of the things that you want to say and do some of the things you want to do. You don't always act on your thoughts or appetites or impulses.

Why? Because they're wrong. Because doing so would damage you. It would lead to punishment. It would harm your reputation.

So even when you want to talk back to your parents or your boss, you know better: you're going to pay for it if you do. Even if you bear a grudge against someone in your mind, you know better than to act on it. Even when you want to slug somebody, you don't throw down. Or when you want to indulge sexual temptation, you don't. Even when you want to take your neighbor's new truck, you leave it where it is. Even when you want to lie to get out of a bad situation, you know that it's right to tell the truth.

Right? Well, maybe. Maybe you do talk back, act on grudges, slug people, gratify your lust, steal your neighbor's truck or lie. When you do, it's wrong. Sins like that will work to kill your faith, rob you of life and salvation. Repent. Confess those sins. Be forgiven, because Christ has died to set you free.

But most of the time, you know better, I'm guessing: otherwise, I might be preaching this sermon to you over a greasy phone through thick glass while you do your time. You know better than to act on all those sinful temptations and impulses that lurk around your mind, that crawl out of your heart. Because of the consequences, you suppress them as much as possible. In the words of that great theologian, Thumper, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

On behalf of society, thank you. Thanks for not acting on every sinful impulse that runs around your brain. Some would say that you should do whatever feels right to you, which I believe is also the worldview of sociopaths. If everybody did whatever they felt like doing to gratify themselves, this world would be a whole lot uglier than it already is. So thanks for suppressing a lot of the temptations floating around in your mind.

At the same time, remember what Jesus said: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person” (Mt. 15:19-20). Before you do anything sinful, you’ve already thought about it. You’re already guilty before God. You’re already defiled and sinful. You’re not righteous before Him because you’ve managed to quell a lot of temptations inside. That was what the Pharisees believed: they thought that as long as their actions were law-abiding, they must be righteous before God. In response, Jesus called them white-washed tombs: they looked very nice and clean on the outside, but inside they were dead.

White-washed tombs. That’s what I mean when I say that you’re not who you appear to be. According to God’s Law, you’re worse. Far worse than you appear. You’re guilty of all the sin that you’ve held inside: even though you haven’t acted on it, it’s death and decay to your soul. You may not feel that bad about it: but then again, Jeremiah tells us that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). We can’t comprehend the depth of our sin: rather, we believe what God says about us in His Word.

But here’s where the Law really crushes: Jesus is coming back to judge in glory. You haven’t seen Him revealed in His holiness and glory yet. But you will. On that day, if your sins still cling to you, you’ll be exposed for who you truly are: and according to the Law, that deserves only God’s wrath and punishment.

According to the Law, you’re not who you appear to be. You’re worse.

We’d better not end the sermon there. There’s some better news according to the Gospel.

2. According to the Gospel

According to the Gospel, you’re not who you appear to be.

What with keeping all those bad thoughts and behaviors in check, you come across as a pretty nice person and all. But according to the Gospel, you’re not a pretty nice person.

You’re far, far better than that.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us,” begins our epistle, and what kind of love is that? We find it in the chapter before: in His love for us, God the Father has given His only- begotten Son. He’s given Him up to death in your place. He’s declared, “I so love you and desire your salvation that I have judged My Son in Your place. I do not ask you to earn your salvation by your works and efforts and sacrifices; instead, I have given My Son to work and sacrifice and die. And I have raised Him up again!”

What does this mean to you? It means that by the grace of God, you’re a child of God. You’re not the lawless lost one looking in from the outside, nor the hypocrite who pretending to be good and hoping the Lord doesn’t get wise: you’re a child of God. You’re not a slave who has to earn his keep and keep the Master’s favor, nor are you an employee who has to get a good performance review in order to make the cut. You’re a child of God. For Jesus’ sake, He says, “At your Baptism, I made you My own. I put My name on you, made you a member of My household—and My household lasts forever.”

For Jesus' sake, you're a child of God. Not, "you will be a child of God," but "you are." Heaven is yours. The only way, dear believers, that you could not inherit heaven now would be for you to embrace sin and death and run away from home.

Furthermore, you're pure. Your sins are gone, because Jesus has taken them all away. He's died for them all. Again, since you're forgiven, God doesn't see you as an okay person trying hard to do the right thing: He sees you as right and righteous, because Jesus has taken the wrong away. He doesn't see you as hypocritical, hiding your sins: because of Jesus has taken them away, you have no sins left to hide. They're gone.

You're a child of God—now. You're pure before Him—now. That's what the Gospel declares.

You just don't appear that way right now. The text tells you: "The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him." The world didn't recognize Jesus as the Son of God—instead, the world crucified Him. Don't expect any praise or favors from the world for being a Christian. Expect the world to say, "You don't look like a child of God, so you're getting no respect from us."

Furthermore, you don't appear pure, either. People will see and remember your mistakes, not the grace that God gives. You'll remember them, too, especially those sins along the way where the Law has especially crushed you, where the regret still feels fresh. Sin still clings to you in this life, and will try to persuade you that you're not pure and never could be. But that's the appearance, and the Gospel declares that you're far better than you appear. You're not pure before God because you never sinned: you're pure because Jesus has taken those sins away. Once you were defiled. Jesus has made you pure by taking those sins on Himself and dying in your place.

You don't appear to be a pure child of God—to the world or to yourself. But you've got Jesus' Word on it. Today, He's declared His powerful, effective words, "I forgive you all of your sins." Soon, He visits you in, with and under bread and wine, with His body and blood, for the forgiveness of sins. If your sins are forgiven, you're pure. If your sins are forgiven, you're a child of God. On this Sunday of All Saints, you are numbered among them. You don't see it yet—you don't appear that way. Neither do you see Jesus yet—rather, He cloaks Himself in His Word and Supper to give you forgiveness and purity again.

It won't always be like this. Jesus is coming back in glory for all to see. You haven't seen Him revealed in His holiness and glory yet. But you will. You will see Him as He is, the glorious Son of God who took on flesh and died for you. And then, as one redeemed and forgiven, you'll be exposed for who you truly are even now for Jesus' sake.

You're pure.

You're a saint.

You're a child of God.

Because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.