

RECOGNIZING THE UNRECOGNIZED

by Ray C. Stedman

We begin, with this message, a new series in the first letter of John. We have traced John's major themes thus far concerning the necessity of maintaining fellowship with the Son of God, the shared life. Then the theme of maintaining truth in the midst of an exceedingly deceitful world. And now a new series on maintaining righteousness.

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that every one who does right is born of him. {1 Jn 2:29 RSV}

It is most unfortunate that the chapter break occurs after this verse and not before. If you compare this with Verse 7 of Chapter 3, you will see that Verse 29 belongs with Chapter 3 rather than with Chapter 2. It is surprising to me that among the plethora of new versions of the Bible we have, there is none that attempts to revise the chapter divisions. The authors of these new versions seem in many instances not to hesitate in the least to take liberties with the inspired text, but these uninspired and uninspiring chapter divisions they seem to regard as so many "sacred cows" which no one has the temerity to change. Well, some day I'm going to...Well, we will leave it at that.

In this section John has been thinking of Jesus Christ. He has reminded us that there is coming an hour when each Christian will see him face to face. He is thinking of that encounter and the joy of seeing him again without that incomplete understanding we often experience now. It is not that Christians do not have personal contact with Christ now. We definitely do. It is that which keeps our faces alight, our hearts aflame, and our lives filled with joy. But, as Peter describes it, ours is now an experience of not seeing and yet loving. But John speaks of a day when we shall see him face to face. Suddenly he sees how the knowledge of Christ which we now have, incomplete as it may be, is the key to a problem that every Christian faces at one time or another -- the problem of recognizing other Christians. How to know whether a man or woman, a boy or girl, is genuinely born again. How to distinguish between the phony and the true, the mere professor and the real possessor of Christian life, between the one who is genuinely born again and the religious activist. He says the key is, "every one who does right is born of him."

Surely there is someone in this congregation who says, "Aha, that's what I've been waiting for. I have thought all along that this whole business of doctrine and belief was secondary, that the real test is a life. The man who is helpful, honest, and kind, and does the right thing, that is the man who is acceptable, that is the important thing." Well, if you are thinking that way it reveals that you are a victim of the folly of incomplete truth. Unfortunately there are many people who read the Scriptures that way. They extract from it a portion of a verse, one particular phrase, and canonize it, making that the whole Scripture and discarding the rest. For, notice, there is a qualification that John links with this. It is folly to ignore these qualifications. He says, "If you know that he is righteous, then (and only then) will you know that every one who does right is born of him." If you cannot fulfill the qualification you are in no condition to make the judgment. But if you know that he is righteous, then you have the key.

In this little verse the apostle uses two quite different words for know. There is the first one, "If you know," which means absolute truth, i.e., if you know in a clear and unqualified way, if you understand in the fullest degree "that he is righteous, then you will know," by means of experience or observation, "that every one who does righteousness is born of him." The key to this passage is this qualification. Do you know, as absolute truth, understanding it clearly, that God is righteous? You say, "What does

righteous mean, anyway?" Is it not strange that we can read Scripture frequently and never really grasp some of these major words? Righteous or righteousness is one of these. What is it? Righteousness is God behaving. It is whatever God does. God, obviously, is the standard for all human behavior, or for the behavior of any creature in the universe. God is always consistent with himself, i.e., he always acts like God. He cannot act in any other way. Therefore, whatever he does is righteous. That is the standard, so that righteousness is God behaving as God. Now read that verse like that. "If you know how God behaves, then you will know that whoever behaves like God is born of him." That is what John is saying. They will bear the family mark. Whoever behaves like God is obviously born of God, for it takes God's life to behave like God. That is the simplicity of it.

Now we can break this down even further. In specifics, what does God do that is different? The answer is given to us in the revelation that has come through Jesus Christ. That is what he came for, to manifest the Father, to show us how God behaves, how he acts. The answer can be put briefly this way. He acts out of love in such a way as to satisfy justice. Love that satisfies justice; that is righteousness. Nothing else will qualify, it must be both; love and justice. If you are hungry, and I feel sorry for you and steal \$5.00 from the bank to buy you a meal, I have manifested love toward you, but I have not satisfied justice with regard to the bank. That would be love without justice, and is an unrighteous act. No matter if the motive be commendable, it is love without justice. If you parents indulge your children, giving them anything and everything they want, you show love to them, but you do not show justice. You are not treating them according to reality, and so it is an unrighteous deed. It will ultimately result in that wickedness of yours being imparted to them, and appearing as a rebellious attitude in them later on. It may be love, but it is not love that satisfies justice, and so it is not righteousness. Now if I steal \$5.00 from the bank to satisfy my hunger and you put me in jail, without feeding me, then you have manifested justice, but no love. The classic case of that is the scene from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* when Shylock demands his pound of flesh as his righteous due (he thinks) before the law. But he is showing no consideration of love, therefore it is an unrighteous act, even though it is legally correct.

Thus many of the acts we do to conform with the law are still unrighteous acts in the sight of God, because there is no love in them that satisfies justice. Love that satisfies justice is always unselfish, self-giving, willing to suffer inconvenience, even heartache and shame. It is concerned about the need of another, and yet concerned that the way that need is met will not affect still others adversely. That is righteousness. It is not merely doing something helpful. There are a great many things done in the world today that are helpful, and we tend to label them as righteous, but they are not righteous. They are helpful but so much of our activity in helping one another arises directly out of our own self-interest. Many of us would positively be astounded if we could see how much of what we do is really because, down deep, somehow, our own self-interest is involved. We get something out of it. Such actions may be helpful, and surely we are grateful for all such manifestations for human life would not be possible if people did not respond in helpfulness, even for causes of self-interest, to one another. But they are not righteous deeds.

Further, righteousness is not something costly. I know there are those who give away fortunes, even give up their lives, for causes they believe in. We tend to label these as righteous deeds, but they are not necessarily so. The Apostle Paul reminds us, "If I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing," {1 Cor 13:3 KJV}. They are not righteous, because righteousness always consists of two elements, love that satisfies justice. It is to give, whether or not you receive anything in return, and in such a way that no encouragement is given to evil. That is righteousness. That is the way God behaves. There is a burning phrase that has stuck in my mind ever since I read it in the Gospel of Luke, where our Lord describes the Father as "kind to the ungrateful and the selfish," {Luke 6:35 RSV}. That is righteousness. Now if you know how God behaves, what righteousness is when you see it, then you will know that every one who does that is born of him. That is the mark.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God; {1 Jn 3:1a RSV}

Here is an astonishing thing, he says. It is not the fact that God loves, but how God loves. That is the astonishing thing. What manner of love is this! Literally, the Greek for what manner is, "of what country" is this! It is an exclamation of astonishment, of surprise. What kind of country is this, what foreign land is this, that is represented in love like that! It is so different. It is the strangeness of God's love that is in view in this whole thing. How is God's love strange? "Well," John says, "in that it makes us, you and me, the children of God."

Perhaps some of you are thinking, "Well, you may be surprised at this, but I'm not. I consider it quite logical. Why shouldn't I be a child of God, like anyone else?" If you think this, then you do not understand righteousness. Romans 5 reveals to us how God saw us when he found us. There are three words that describe us in that passage: "When we were without strength," when we were helpless, when we were unable to make any contribution to the redemption we desperately needed, when there was not a thing we could do about it, we were utterly bankrupt, and even our good was tainted with self-interest so that we could make no contribution whatsoever, "when we were without strength, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly," -- for us. But it does not stop there, it goes on even further. "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us." While we were sinners, i.e., while we were proud, overbearing in our attitude toward God, treating him with condescension and indifference, tiresome. That is what sin does, it makes us tiresome individuals, difficult to live with, hard to get along with. When we were this way, Christ died for us. Even this does not exhaust his description.

He goes on a verse or two later to say, "If while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son ..." If while we were enemies; not only without strength, not only sinners, proud and prickly in our attitude, but also when we were absolutely opposed to God, enemies of his grace, treacherous, hateful, resenting what God was doing and resisting every attempt he made to reach us: that is Paul's description. Now, John says, what amazing love! God flings the bloodstained mantle of his love over us and calls us his children. And he not only calls us this, but he actually makes us so:

...and so we are. {1 Jn 3:1b RSV}

Is that not amazing? You Christian people, do you ever think of yourself that way? Do you ever think of yourself as in this condition when God found you, and you would still be like that if God had not found you? What kind of pride is it that makes us think of ourselves as some kind of special catch that God has made. How fortunate he ought to feel that we have consented to join his side! No, no, "see what manner of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God," that we prickly, tiresome, difficult people should be made children of God!

Now, God does not call all men his children, as some people do. Paul makes that clear in his letter to the Galatians, "you are all the children of God, by faith in Jesus Christ," {cf, Gal 3:26}. The only one God ever calls his child is the one who has exercised faith in Jesus Christ. God is not "the Father of all mankind." This is an absolutely unbiblical phrase. It has no justification whatever in the Scriptures, in fact, it is positively denied. He is the Creator of all mankind. We all share with every other human being on the face of this earth a common heritage in humanity. We are all members of one race. This is an important truth; but we are not all the children of God. When you see that phrase used in that sense you know that the one who employs it does not know or understand what God has said. We are children of God only by faith in Jesus Christ.

All men can be the children of God, there is redemption provided for all. We sang it together, "Lord, I believe were sinners more, than sands upon the ocean shore; thou hast for all a ransom paid, for all a full atonement made." There is plenty of grace in Christ. Wherever a man responds to the grace of God

reaching out toward him, that man, by faith, becomes a child of God. God's love has reached the world, has encompassed the race. In potential he is ready to fling around all the mantle of relationship that makes men his children. That is the extent of God's love, consistent with his justice. God desires that his enemies should become his children, and that his children should become mature sons. That is his righteousness, and this is the unmistakable mark of one who becomes a child of God; he too begins to exercise righteousness. He begins to exhibit love in line with justice. He becomes concerned and prompted to act contrary to his self-interest, yet consistent with the law, in the commitment of love. That is the mark.

Now, if you do not see that in someone else it does not necessarily mean they are not Christians. It may mean, as it does with many of us at times, that at the moment they are not acting consistent with the nature God has given them. But the point John is making is, if you do see this unmistakable mark of love acting in consistency with justice, then you need have no doubts whatsoever. The man is born of God. He may be confused in certain areas of truth, he may not agree about the mode of baptism with you, he may not have light on the dispensations, or fall short in many other things, but if you see him acting righteously, prompted by love and yet consistent with justice, then you know here is one of God's own.

But do not expect the world in general to recognize this. They will not understand and may even strongly resent the fact that another has become a child of God. Every new convert discovers this when, in the flush of his new-found enthusiasm for Christ, he goes back to his family and friends to tell them he has now become a child of God. He expects them to glow with enthusiastic rapport, but he meets with coldness and an "Oh-is-that-so? I'll-watch-and-see" attitude. He feels the first bucket of cold water thrown upon his faith. Why? John explains it. "The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him." That is why.

We Christians only manifest the nature of God occasionally. We ought to be doing it more and more as we grow in grace, so that it becomes more consistently visible, but there are occasions when we do not, and, even when we do, it is sometimes rather indistinct. But when Jesus was here among men, when he walked for thirty-three and a half years among men, living among them in the intimacy of daily life, there was never a moment but that he clearly and continuously manifested righteousness, the nature and character of God. It was as clear as the daylight. There could never be a clearer human revelation of what God is like than there was in the Son of God. It was a perfect picture, but still they did not know him. Even then, they failed to recognize him, they did not know who he was. As the Negro spiritual sings, "Poor little Jesus boy, they didn't know who you was." They did not know, when he stood before them, that here was God behaving as God in man. They saw only the externals. They saw him as a peasant's son, a carpenter, as a tub-thumping rabble-rouser, or, at best, as a good man experiencing incredible bad luck, that is how they saw him. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, said. "Had they known him, they never would have crucified the Lord of glory," {cf, 1 Cor 2:8}. If they had any idea who it was that was standing before them -- if they could have discerned the glory of his character, if they had seen behind the externals to the inward beauty he was exhibiting, they never would have nailed him to a cross. That is the last thing they would have done.

But they did not see -- and why not? -- because they shut their ears to what he said. They would not believe him, and, therefore, they could not see him. It is always an amazing thing to me how the "seeing is believing" proverb ever got credence among men. It is exactly the reverse, believing is seeing. Not only religiously, but in every field of life. Believing is seeing; but they did not believe, therefore, they could not see. Because they shut their ears and their eyes to his words and his deeds, they would not believe; therefore, they could not see, and they did not know him, and so they took him out and nailed him to a cross. Now if they did not know him in spite of the perfect manifestation of righteousness which he was giving, then surely we cannot expect the world to recognize us as sons of God, or to treat

us with the deference that a child of God ought to expect. They will not.

Do not be surprised at this. All the writers of Scripture say, "Do not be surprised if the world discounts your Christian testimony, laughs in your face, and makes scornful, even contemptuous, remarks about what you believe. Do not be surprised at that, they did it with the Lord too." They did not know him. And it will still be true of us, as John is pointing out. The principle by which we find power, rest, joy and strength is, in the eyes of the world, utter foolishness. Paul says so. "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing," {1 Cor 1:18 RSV}. The word of the cross, the principle which repudiates self-interest, the principle which renounces any advantage you may gain out of a situation in order to gain advantage for God; which risks income, position, and sometimes even life itself, in order to be true, honest, clean and committed -- that principle, the world says, is foolish. "You'll never get ahead, not in this company, if you act like that." "Save that for church, it won't work in business, it's foolish." Is that not what they say? Yet to us who are being saved, if we have the guts to act on what God has said -- not only at church but in the world, at home, at school, anywhere else in life -- it is the power of God. It achieves what God has come to do in human life. It is power.

What for? Why do you need power? Do you think of it in terms of miracles, dazzling displays, and wonderful deeds that you could do to capture the attention of others? Is that why you want power? Look at Colossians Chapter 1, Verse 11: Paul prays for power for believers, "May you be strengthened with all power [tremendous, isn't it?], according to his glorious might [isn't that exciting! For what?], for all endurance and patience with joy," {Col 1:11 RSV}. Endurance! That means putting up with the conditions in which you live. And patience - waiting quietly for something to happen. And joy, in the midst of it all. That takes power, does it not? You cannot do that without power. It is impossible to live like that in the midst of the conditions in which you live, if you do not have the power of God. You know it, do you not? It takes far more power than any of us can possibly produce in ourselves. It takes God's power. The word of the cross, the principle of the denial of self and self-interest, is the power of God, to us who are being saved. Now, that is righteousness. The question John leaves with us in this whole section is this: "What is the quality of your life?" What is it like? What kind of life are you displaying before others? Do they recognize you as a child of God? The world will not, necessarily, but do other Christians? Do you have the mark?

A number of us gathered yesterday to think and pray together about the world in which we live. As we talked about conditions today, there came an increasing conviction upon us that the whole problem with this troubled, tortured, bedeviled world, with its twisted concepts and its evident confusion, can be traced right back to the Christian church. Christians have failed to manifest the righteousness of God. They are salt without savor, in the midst of society. Therefore, it ill behooves the church to point the finger of scorn or shame or blame at the world for the condition it is in; it is our fault, we are to blame. If we were living on this level, if we were laying hold of what is so abundantly provided for us in Christ, if, in our homes, we were living like this, there would be no more bickerings and quarrelings, fightings, coldness and frigidity, between husband and wife, or parents and children. We would be a demonstration of the righteousness of God.

Now, my prayer is that not one of us, the preacher included, may go from this service content to live on the same level of life we have been living. If this world, this sick society, is ever going to be altered to any degree, it will be done God's way. It will not be by our zealous, apparently earnest programs of trying to challenge society, to correct them, or legislate to them. It will never be done this way. It will be only as we are faithful to the calling to which God has called us, and we begin to lay hold of the provision he has given to us in Jesus Christ, that we are changed. I do not think anything more deplorable could ever result from this service than for us to experience what we have so consistently done, from Sunday to Sunday -- to come and have our hearts torn apart a bit by the Word of God, and the searching of the Spirit, and then go right back home to the same empty level of living, and never face

ourselves there.

Prayer:

Our Father, we sincerely ask that you will save us from the stupid, and stupefying, technique of allowing our hearts to be searched and torn by the Spirit of God in this moment, and then to go right back and be the same kind of person we have always been. Save us from agreeing to these matters in a Sunday ministry, but through the week being no different ourselves. What a sickening, nauseating thing it must be in your sight, who has come that we might be transparent and consistent, the same at home as we are in church, the same at work as we are at home, the same at school as we are anywhere else, consistently the same because of the indwelling of the Son of God, the nature of God which has been given to us. Lord, we echo these words of John: "What manner of love" has been bestowed upon us, that we who know what we really are, should be called children of God; and so we are." We cannot deny it, Father. We know it is true even though we do not act like it. But we pray that we may begin to delight thy heart as the Lord Jesus delighted thee in the days of his flesh. We thank you, in Christ's name, Amen

Title: Recognizing the Unrecognized

By: Ray C. Stedman

Scripture: 1 Jn 2:29 - 3:1

Date: January 22, 1967

Series: Maintaining Righteousness

Message No: 1

Catalog No: 150

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