

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 64

1 JOHN: RELATIONSHIP OR FELLOWSHIP? PART 3

Test # 4: Do you reject this evil world? 1 John 2:15 is the basis for this test.

1 John 2:15 ¹⁵Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

MacArthur is very inconsistent on this point. He admits that believers are “vulnerable to being sucked into this evil world’s system now and then... [and] lured into worldly things” [p. 74] but the whole thesis of his book is that any believer who does succumb to the lure of the κόσμος world system is not saved, should doubt his salvation, and then do the things that will assure him that he is saved. He also makes some dogmatic assertions about the Christian mindset. “This love speaks of our deepest constraints, our most compelling emotions and goals. Christians won’t feel that way toward anything in this world because they know that until Christ returns, this world is dominated by God’s enemy....The evil one has designed a system that the Bible simply calls ‘the world.’ The Greek term (*kosmos*) speaks of a system encompassing false religion, errant philosophy, crime, immorality, materialism, and the like. When you become a Christian, such things repel you, not attract you. Sometimes you may be lured into worldly things, but it isn’t what you love; it’s what you hate....We’re vulnerable to being sucked into this evil world’s system now and then, but our love is toward God. That love is what will draw us out and redirect our focus toward heavenly priorities. Do you reject the world? Do you reject its false religions, damning ideologies, godless living, and vain pursuits? Instead, do you love God, His truth, His kingdom, and all that He stands for?” [pp. 73-74].

MacArthur suggests a true, born again Christian cannot deeply love anything in this world. That’s just simply not true and to put that burden on people is to put an unrealistic and unbiblical requirement on their faith. Many Christian people love their spouse or their children to the extent of even making them idols of sorts. Others may love their job or their home or some hobby more than perhaps they should. Perhaps they love hunting or fishing or football or golf to the extent those pursuits interfere with their life as a believer. None of this is ideal, but it is real and it doesn’t mean they are not born again. It may mean they aren’t as faithful, as obedient, and as spiritually productive as they otherwise could be, but it doesn’t mean they are unsaved.

Both James and John had something to say about loving the world that is quite a sobering truth. Part of that truth is the Christians are vulnerable to falling into this trap and when they do it doesn't mean they are unsaved.

James 4:4 ⁴You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

1 John 2:16 ¹⁶For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

Here is a better explanation of 1 John 2:15 that explores the fellowship aspects of the verse. "...[M]any Christians...pay their respects to God on one day of the week (and only part of that day), while they devote the other six days of the week to the world. Now is it possible to live such a life and still go to heaven? Of course, it is. We can do nothing to deserve our eternal life. Worshipping God seven days a week could not open the gates of heaven for us. But living six days of the week for the world and one day of the week for God will not endear us to His heart; in other words, we will not be very close to Him. He won't feel loved by us; therefore, why should He manifest His love for us? That's what this letter is all about—getting close to God. It won't happen if we try to love God and the world at the same time" [David R. Anderson, *Maximum Joy: First John—Relationship or Fellowship?*, p. 107].

"John now warns them of the dangers that surround believers, no matter how advanced their Christian walk. Love of the world denies a love for our holy God and identifies us with a system doomed to destruction. Do not love the world may be rephrased as 'stop loving the world.' John's readers were acting in a way that was inconsistent with the relationship with Christ" [Radmacher, Allen, and House, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, p. 1708-1709]. The word translated love is ἀγαπᾶτε from ἀγαπάω and it is a present active imperative verb. The present tense of the verb refers to action that is normally or usually taking place in the present from the standpoint of the writer who, in this case, is John. The people John was writing to were loving the world and the things of the world and John was giving them a command to stop it. He didn't do that because they were unsaved; if that was the case, he would have given them the gospel. He wrote it because they were out of fellowship and needed to be restored.

Test # 5: Do you eagerly await Christ's return? He bases this test on 1 John 3:2-3.

1 John 3:2-3 ²Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will

see Him just as He is. ³And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

“If you’re a true Christian, you will have hope in your heart, and your hope will be focused on Christ’s return. That hope will purify your life....If you find yourself longing for the return of Jesus Christ, that’s evidence of salvation. It’s an indication of a new nature within, which longs to be delivered from a body of sin while becoming like the perfect Christ. If you have such holy longings and affections, you’ve passed an important test indicating the reality of your eternal salvation” [pp. 75-76]. The hope of Christ’s return should purify one’s life, but that is a far cry from saying that it must purify one’s life in order to prove justification salvation which is MacArthur’s position.

It is noteworthy that John refers to the recipients of his letter as “beloved” and he includes himself in their group by referring to them as “we.” It is not possible that John would have included himself in a group of unbelievers in this context. In the previous verse, John wrote that the Father has such love for us that we are called children of God. That is hardly a description of unsaved people. John was writing this letter to an audience that was clearly composed of people he thought were born again believers.

We are being transformed into the image of Christ even now but there is nothing in our outward appearance that would physically identify that transformation taking place. When we see Him, will be like Him and we should want to abide in Him now so that we will not be ashamed when we do see Him based on the fact that we were unlike Him before seeing Him, if that is the case. If we are being transformed now, we will be completely transformed when we see Him and that should drive us to strive to be like Him now. This is completely a fellowship issue.

Zane Hodges believes that MacArthur’s position completely misses the point. Certainly, looking forward to the return of Christ can have a godly, abiding effect on believers but that isn’t the real issue John is discussing. Positionally, we are pure by virtue of being in Christ. “John will very shortly talk about a ‘sinless’ experience and the words just as He is pure strongly suggest that the same idea is latent here. As we shall see, the born again person does not sin at all because he has in him the sinless seed of God’s nature and he cannot sin. Thus at the inward level of his redeemed nature, the believer is every bit as pure as his Savior is. That purity will be totally realized at the coming of the Lord, but is ours now at the core of our being. Thus the phrase everyone who has this hope in Him is an equivalent to John’s familiar expression ‘whoever believes in Him [in His name, etc.]’ The individual who has the sure hope of being like the Savior is one who has believed in Him. Like Abraham, his hope is founded on faith (Romans 4:18) so that he knows his eternal future is guaranteed by his Lord. It is this faith which results in the new birth with the consequent inward purification which the new birth produces. The phrase purifies

himself should be noted. It points to the causality of the believer's faith in Christ. When a person responds to the gospel message by believing it, he can be said to cause the purification which automatically follows as part and parcel of 'the washing of regeneration' (Titus 3:5). A rough analogy would be the turning on of water in a shower. The water does the actual cleansing, but the person could be said to 'shower himself clean'" [Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love*, p. 130]. Hodges and MacArthur hold distinctly opposing interpretations. Which position makes biblical sense? MacArthur's position is that we must examine the purity of our experiential life in order to determine whether or not we are truly justified. Hodges maintains that all believers have positional purity based on their belief in Christ.

Dr. Anderson also understands this Scripture to be referring to the new nature every believer acquires at the moment of the new birth. "John is slowly getting around to the new nature we have in Christ. He is saying that God's nature is righteous. So we can be born of God and share in His nature. We can be righteous. It stupefies John that God would love us enough to let us share in His nature. This is the same nature that came into Mary in the form of Jesus and was born on Christmas. Part of this same divine nature was passed along to us a new birth. It has changed our entire character and make-up. Now we are truly the children of God. That's who we really are....Until someone has experienced the new birth, it's even hard to explain what it is like to have this new nature within. But in verse 2 John goes on to that one day this new nature is the only nature that we will manifest. Why? Because someday our evil nature, our sinful nature passed down to us congenitally, will be taken away. That will be when He appears. At that time we shall be completely like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. This is the final stage of sanctification of the believer (perfective sanctification), or glorification. This is when all the effects of the fall are reversed for us. We have glorified bodies which don't wear out...but best of all, no more sinful nature to contend with. We shall be like Him" [David R. Anderson, *Maximum Joy: First John—Relationship or Fellowship?*, pp.135-136].

As with the other tests MacArthur devised, this one causes more problems than it purports to solve. Must a new believer be immediately pure in order to prove he is really justified? If not, how long can he be impure before he proves he has been a false professor of faith? Most new believers know nothing of eschatology and the return of Christ. Are they saved or does their ignorance of His return prove they are unsaved? How long must they remain ignorant of His return before they prove they are unsaved? Many Christian people do not believe Christ is coming back any time soon. Are they unsaved because they deny his imminent return? What if you know He is coming back, but you are not overly excited about it? I know Christian people who say they look forward to the Lord's return but they qualify that by saying they want to finish school or get married or have kids or see their kids grow up and have their own kids or enjoy life

for a while before the Lord returns. Are they unsaved because they really aren't eagerly awaiting Christ's return?

Test # 6: Do you see a decreasing pattern of sin in your life? MacArthur bases this assertion on 1 John 3:4-10.

1 John 3:4-10 ⁴Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. ⁷Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; ⁸the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. ¹⁰By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.

MacArthur interprets this Scripture from a Lordship salvation viewpoint. "Unbroken patterns of sin are characteristic of the unregenerate. No matter what a person claims about being a Christian, if he or she continues in sin, it is only a claim and not a reality. When you became a Christian, the pattern of sin was broken and a new pattern came into existence. Holy affections took over. Does that mean there's no sin in your life? No, because your unredeemed flesh is still there. But the more you pursue those religious affections, the less you will sin. Sin as a life pattern is incompatible with salvation. That's because to experience salvation is to be saved from something, and that something is sin. If a person could continue in sin after being saved from sin, that would mean salvation is ineffective....If you see a decreasing pattern of sin in your life that's evidence of holy affections....If you practice righteousness, you're of God. If you don't, you're not. Plain and simple. If you see victory over sin in your life, if you see righteous motives, righteous desires, righteous words, righteous deeds, and if you're not all you ought to be but certainly not what you used to be, then you have eternal life, so enjoy it" [pp. 76-79]. He wrote a lot more, but you can get the thrust of his thinking from this quote.

MacArthur had to resort to word games to make his point. He creates a distinction between "sinning frequently" and "practicing sin" which is a distinction the Scriptures don't make. He claims the Christian can do the former, frequently sin, but that he cannot practice sin. His basis for making this distinction is the fact that, according to MacArthur, the true believer abides in Him. Among the problems with that line of thought is we know from John 15:1-11, the parable of the vine and the branches, that believers can fail to abide and therefore fail to bear fruit. Abiding is a sanctification

issue and it is not a justification salvation issue. MacArthur's theology cannot allow that truth to stand so he has to come up with another explanation. Part of that explanation is creating this false distinction between sinning frequently and practicing sin and his misinterpretation of abiding. These verses are difficult to understand, however, keeping in mind that John is writing about sanctification or fellowship issues helps inform our understanding of this Scripture. When interpreting Scripture, if the correct starting point isn't understood or is misinterpreted then all the interpretation work we do after that is tainted. Conversely, starting with the correct understanding at least gives us the foundation for determining the correct interpretation.

Understanding this Scripture can get a bit complicated but it was not written to be incomprehensible. "...one small sin in your life, that you know about, but rationalize rather than confess, can rob you of your spiritual vitality. I didn't say it could rob you of heaven, but it can rob you of the abundant life Jesus wants you to have. And that's what John is trying to prevent at this point in his letter. We said this is a letter about fellowship, not relationship. It's not a book about the way; it's a book about the walk. It's not about how to get to heaven; it's about how to have a little bit of heaven on earth. We are in John's section on right living—dealing with our sins. He introduced us to this principle of fellowship in 1 John 1:5-2:2. But now he develops this principle. He takes our understanding of sin in our lives, even though we have already been justified (declared righteous in God's court room in heaven), to a new level" [David R. Anderson, *Maximum Joy: First John—Relationship or Fellowship?*, p. 143]. This scripture is about growth and spiritual maturity.

Here is a real life example of how this mindset plays out in a ministry situation in Russia. I have spoken in the past about the Russian mindset that is works oriented, that is, they expect people to be sorry for their sins and to stop sinning in order to be considered saved. By the way, "saved" is a word they will not use; they use the word "repented" in order to say someone has become a believer. They never, and I mean never, refer to belief as the operative factor in justification salvation; instead, they refer to repentance meaning turning from sin and not sinning any longer. In other words, they insert sanctification into justification and mix the two together. This is exactly the gospel mindset MacArthur presents; in fact, the Baptist seminaries in Russia are all affiliated with the Master's Seminary which is MacArthur's seminary. They were doing Christmas programs in the rural villages and here is what was in the latest newsletter we received from them had to say about a married couple with some girls who are believers. "A couple was there who had been alcoholics. Every evangelistic service, they would attend. They would express repentance and asking for forgiveness, but go right back to drinking. They have 5 girls. All of them would come for VBS and Christmas. The parents let the girls come to church. It took the parents 6 years before they experienced a genuine conversion." It isn't enough for the Russian Baptists to have a person express

belief in Christ; they must also repent of their sins and stop sinning. Because these people made a profession of faith but didn't stop sinning, they were considered to remain in unbelief. Their profession of faith was considered to be false or not genuine. That is exactly what MacArthur teaches from this test of faith in his book *Saved Without a Doubt*.

Test # 7: Do you love other Christians? This is based on 1 John 3:10.

1 John 3:10 ¹⁰By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.

"To say you're in the light—or you've seen the light—is to claim to be a Christian. If so, your life would certainly show some of the life patterns of Christ. Loving fellow Christians is one very basic pattern. To be in fellowship with Christ is to experience and express love. If you claim to be a Christian but do not even like Christians, your claim is a sham. You are in fact walking in darkness, not in the light. Loving fellow Christians comes naturally to the believer...we don't need to be taught to love because it's instinctive, implicit, and inherent within our nature....And it's a love that goes beyond mere feeling to encompass dutiful responsibility, sacrificial service, and sensitive concern....Do you honestly care about other believers or are you cold, uncaring, and indifferent? Do you have a desire to reach out and meet their needs? Those who don't care are spiritually dead, characterized by an ongoing hatred...." [John MacArthur, *Saved Without a Doubt: How to be Sure of Your Salvation*, pp. 80-81]. There's much more that he wrote, but you get the idea. Notice the switch he makes from simply not loving others to possessing hatred. This is a straw man argument. Not liking other people, for whatever reason, doesn't mean you hate them. MacArthur is simply trying to demonize people in order to convince others to agree with his position. In terms of civil Christian discourse and debate, this is quite unloving, wouldn't you say?

The first part of verse 10, "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest" is a conclusion to what has gone before it. This has been about right living and dealing with our sin as believers. "John's been trying to motivate us to godliness by pointing out how sin in the life of a believer is incongruous with Christ's purpose in coming and the new nature of the believer. It goes against who he really is at the core of his being. The *children of God* only demonstrate [obvious or manifest (NKJV)] who they really are when they produce divine righteousness. The *children of the devil* only demonstrate [obvious or manifest (NKJV)] who they really are when they produce sin. So, remember, the sinful nature we were born with remains with us until death. But when you sin, you are revealing only what you were before you were born-again. It does not mean you are not born again with a divine nature. But it does mean you are keeping

the divine nature hidden....*When a Christian sins, he is acting contrary to who he really is and what he really desires.* It's against who he is at the core of his being. Though he still has a sinful nature, he is fundamentally a new creature in Christ whose inner man (his human spirit where God the Father [Eph. 4:6], the Son [Col. 1:27], and the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 6:19] have come to live) screams out with the mind of Christ to do God's will.... *When a Christian sins, he is hiding God's glory.* God does not exist for our glory; we were created for His glory. We are put here to reveal His glory. We can only do that as we allow Him to live through us. We cannot display His glory and His character when we knowingly sin. Verse 10 is about revealing who we really are....*When a Christian sins, it is contrary to Christ...*As we allow Christ in us to be made visible for the world to see, we are helping to destroy the works of the devil. It is contrary to Christ's purpose to do anything else" [David R. Anderson, *Maximum Joy: First John—Relationship or Fellowship?* pp. 158-160].

Test # 8: Do you experience answered prayer? He bases this on 1 John 3:22

1 John 3:22 ²²and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.

1 John 5:14–15 ¹⁴This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.

MacArthur's explanation of this concept is essentially correct in terms of exegesis but, of course, he is incorrect in making this relationship truth instead of fellowship truth.

This Scripture is admittedly difficult and I can't say I understand it well. But I can say there are several keys to illuminating it. One is abiding in Him; this Scripture is applicable to believers who are in fellowship. That means we are doing that which is pleasing to Him which involves obedience. Conversely, the implication is that asking for things that are not pleasing to Him will not be answered. The ultimate key is asking for things that are in God's will.

"...the Christian who is actively seeking to please God will not ask for things that are not pleasing in His sight! As John states later in the epistle, we can expect answers to our prayers when we ask 'according to His will' (cf. 5:14-15). Since the obedient Christian is seeking to do God's 'will' by keeping His commands, he will naturally make all his prayers subject to that will when he is doubt about what God truly wishes to do. This is not sidestepping, since the best examples of a request made subject to God's will is the prayer of our Lord Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane: 'Father, if it is Your will, take this cup from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done' (Luke 22:42). When prayer

arises, therefore, from the heart of one in whose life the will of God is first and foremost, then whatever he asks of God will be received from Him precisely because his is asking 'according to His will (5:14). Like our Lord, the man or woman of prayer will always seek that will first; in our Lord's case, the actual answer was not in the removal of the cup of suffering (Jesus drank that!) but in the accomplishment of His request, 'Not My will, but Yours, be done'! Prayer for the will of God to be accomplished is thus one of the primary ways in which obedient Christians can pray (cf. Acts 21:14). At the same time, where Scripture makes God's will clear, the Christian may pray directly for that..." [Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love*, pp. 166-167].

Only believers can experience answered prayer with the exception, it seems, of one specific prayer and that prayer is a request to God for justification salvation. Once we experience the new birth, we have standing as members of the family of God to petition the Father in the name of the Son. This Scripture cannot be used of unbelievers; therefore, it cannot in any way be an indication of the new birth. This Scripture cannot be used to test oneself concerning salvation. MacArthur's test fails the test!

If you are praying for an unbeliever to be saved and it never happens, are you unsaved? If your prayers are answered only part of the time are you unsaved? Are you unsaved if you are not a really serious prayer warrior? If you neglect to pray about some issue, does that prove you are unsaved?

Test # 9: Do you experience the ministry of the Holy Spirit? This is based on 1 John 4:13.

1 John 4:13 ¹³By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

MacArthur's test is invalid from the start because he misinterprets this Scripture to refer to the indwelling that is the result of the baptism of the Spirit. What he writes about the Spirit is true; it just isn't the subject here.

Expressing love toward others is a mark of spiritual maturity. "For this love [Divine love] to be fully developed, it must be born into the world of our deeds, our actions. Properly nurtured and exercised, love becomes...full grown [and] mature...And the world takes a look. So this kind of love needs external expression to become mature....Jesus says when we learn to love each other this way, then the whole world will know that we are His disciples (His fully-devoted followers). This is mature perfect love....But in the context of a community of believers, where one believer sacrifices to meet the needs of another (whether materially or psychologically or spiritually) we can *know that we abide in Him and He in us*. That is, we can know we are having close, intimate fellowship with Him. It is this believer in this kind of community who can experience a fresh wave of

confidence (*know*) in God's love. It is in this kind of community that the cross is openly confessed and the blood of Christ is preached. In this place of open confession of the cross, once again the fundamental proof of God's perfect love for us is displayed, confirmed, and emphasized. When the text says that God 'has given us of His Spirit' it does not say God has given us His Spirit. It says 'He has given us of His Spirit.' And it really does not say *Holy Spirit*; it just says *pneuma*, spirit. It could be either Spirit or spirit. In this context, we might paraphrase it like this: 'By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us [deep, mutual fellowship], because He has allowed us to share in His Spirit/spirit of love.' ...it is only the Holy Spirit who can produce such perfect love in us, since *agape* is the first fruit of the Holy Spirit. When we see this kind of love demonstrated in our midst, we can know with certainty that God abides in us" [David R. Anderson, *Maximum Joy: First John—Relationship or Fellowship?*, pp. 210-211].

Exactly what is the ministry of the Holy Spirit MacArthur claims this test is all about? We already know he misunderstands this Scripture from the beginning by applying it to the ministry of the baptism of the Spirit. Some of the evidences he gives such as helping someone can equally apply to pagans; they can help people. He used the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit as it pertains to understanding Scripture as evidence but what if the new Christian never understands the Scriptures. Given MacArthur's Lordship salvation orientation, we can make a case that he doesn't understand the Scriptures concerning grace and justification salvation. Is that evidence that he is unsaved? Are all the people unsaved who have fallen prey to a mistaken concept of the ministry of the Spirit as the people who have become ensnared in Word of Faith charismatic/Pentecostal excesses have done? Paul made it pretty clear that believers can grieve the Spirit, quench the Spirit, and by implication fail to walk in the Spirit. Are they proving they are unsaved when that happens?

Ephesians 4:30 ³⁰Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

1 Thessalonians 5:19 ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit;

Galatians 5:16 ¹⁶But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.