

1 John 3

Action Words of the Christian Life

The Christian life is one of action, not theory. But of what kind of action should the Christian life consist?

For many people, religion consists of doing certain rituals, attending certain performances, perhaps following certain rules. As we look around us, we could find an endless variety of rituals, performances, and rules by which different people act out whatever it is they call faith.

Having a specific list of things to do in our religion is comforting. We like well-defined lists of actions, perhaps because we can feel as though we were safe, that God is pleased with us when we reach the end of the list. But that type of religion, centered around rituals, performances, and rules fails, for two reasons.

First, in those systems, the list of things we need to do in order to please God has a certain length. For some, the list is longer; for some, the list is shorter. But at some point, we like to say, "I've reached the end of the list. I'm safe. I'm right with God. I'm going to heaven." The problem is that there is always one more thing to do. If we put any thought into it at all, our lists are never long enough because the length of the list is arbitrary (we made it up), and we never do things well enough, so, unless we are really into self-deception, there's not much real comfort in those lists.

Second, by having a list of rituals, performances, and rules, we imply that, when we reach the end of the list, my obligation to God is complete, so the rest of my life is mine to do with as I please.

1 John 3 lists the action words of the Christian life. But it is a different kind of list. It contains no rituals, no performances, and no rules. These action words from John can be disconcerting, because they lack specifics. And, they can become the foundation for some really high sounding excuses, if we fail to understand one thing; John's message in 1 John is simple.

John was writing to ordinary Christians, not pagans, not those who had gotten the gospel all tied in a knot, not specially gifted people. John wrote to people like us, those whom John described as knowing the truth, as seeking God. The truth had already been revealed to them and they knew the truth. John was restating the obvious to build them up, to reassure them, and to give them confidence.

We are in the midst of a world full of conflicting claims from all directions: from the world and its self-centered ideas, all the way across and through many variations to those misguided religious people with lists of rituals, performances, and rules.

John wrote to remind us that the gospel really is that simple; there is no need for someone to explain it to you (2:27).

Here are John's action words of the Christian life: faith, sinlessness, love, and confidence. The first one, faith, is in 1 John 3:1 – 3.

See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

John does not specifically use the word, faith, here, but look how he describes this action.

"It has not appeared as yet what we shall be."

"Everyone who has his hope fixed on Him..."

"Purifies himself."

Three of the ingredients of faith: hope, but we do not know all the details of how it will happen, yet, in response, we purify ourselves. There are five more essential ingredients of Biblical faith, but John just listed the ones that were important to his point in this place. By the way, I put my list of the eight essential characteristics of Biblical faith on the back of your paper. How did I come up with this list? Easy. I used a concordance and looked up all the places where faith (the noun) or believe (the verb) were used. Those two words are just the noun and verb forms of the same Greek word. We are not the first to turn nouns into verbs. As I looked up each instance, I jotted down what characteristics faith had in that place. After looking up all the passages in the New Testament, I compiled that list on the back of your paper (perhaps 2 – 3 hours work).

In verse 2 of that passage I just read, we have a promise: we will be like Him. But we do not know the particulars. But, because this promise has been verified by what has been seen, heard, touched, and handled (1:1), we have an objective hope, not hope in hope or hope for which there is no proof, but a hope based on real events. If we had all the details, we would not have faith but rather sight, we would have no need to trust in a promise, because there would be no unknowns. John tells us here that our faith, our hope, results in everyone purifying themselves and doing it successfully to an impossible degree, but that is the nature of the promises of God: impossible.

Faith is an action word. We do something about the promises of God. If we don't, it's not faith.

Most people simply do not understand that line of thinking. They want to believe that faith is in the mind, or the heart, but fail to connect it to action. And, just a small language thing between figures of speech in Biblical times versus figures of speech in English today, "Sin," which is a very strong English word, actually was a figure of speech back then, meaning, literally, "to miss the mark," like in archery. "Trespass" was also a figure of speech, literally meaning "to side step." And "heart" in those days was the seat of the character, not the emotions like in English. The seat of the positive emotions was the kidneys, and the seat of the negative emotions was the liver. Different cultures, different figures of speech.

People also fail to understand the sequence of the hope and purity. We purify ourselves because of that hope. Most people think we purify ourselves in order to obtain that hope, that if you are good and moral, you'll go to heaven. That's not what John says.

It is nothing short of self-deception to think we can be that good through our own efforts; our own history tells us so. As John wrote back in 1:8, "If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves." No, we purify ourselves because, as John will write in 4:19, "because He first loved us." We purify ourselves because of that faith. Faith results in action.

When John wrote, "The world does not know," we should not limit his description to just the mean and nasty folks whom everyone agrees don't care about God. John wrote about those who just don't understand faith, like the Pharisees, who majored in purity but never found faith.

John wrote about those for whom facts are not enough. There are two groups there. There are those like the Pharisees who loved theory more than facts, so they could argue over whether it was proper to do a miracle on the Sabbath, and miss the fact that a miracle had been actually performed. Or, like people who are so caught up in defining purity that the reason for it is lost.

And there are those who ignore the facts because the facts don't go along with how they feel or what they want to do. Their version of faith is a self-made justification to do what they wanted to do in the first place.

No, John's version of faith results in pursuing the impossible dream, purity, but not because it's a rule, and not because it might buy me something, but because we love God and want to be like His Son. We act because of faith. As in Romans 14:23, "All that is not of faith is sin."

The second action word of the Christian life is sinlessness (1 Jn 3:4 – 10)

Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous, the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By 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.

Sinlessness is the goal, but is that goal realistic? Even John has conceded that we all still miss the mark. How can he now write (v9), "He cannot sin because he is born of God"?

First, we must remember that John wrote this short letter all at once, probably in not many hours. John intended it to be clear and simple. He intended to be understood. This is not a collection of random sayings, but an integrated whole. John would not contradict himself over the span of a few paragraphs. So how do we reconcile this?

Although many English-speaking people have made much of the apparent contradiction, people using other languages, particularly those who have studied Greek, have no such difficulty. Some of the modern translations have made this clear by making a difference between "practicing sin," a continuing action, and "sin," a point action, a one-time event. The original language has two different verb tenses to express this idea, verb tenses that English does not have.

John's point is to illustrate the difference between those who practice sin, and those who just fall into sin. Children of God do sin, they fall into it, but they don't excuse it or try to justify it, or claim it was really OK. Certainly we can all think of those who practice sin on a scale similar to how a professional musician or athlete practices: every day they hone their skills. But that's not the limit of what John means. John is contrasting those who have given up on defeating sin versus those who pursue the impossible.

Giving up on defeating sin, isn't that what we do? Whether it is a diet or exercise or finances or tempers or tongues, we want to get rid of our failures. But what happens? We fail enough times to the place where we decide we just cannot do it. Rather than feeling like total failures for the rest of our lives, we make up convenient excuses why we didn't really have to fix that, that it is really OK, or that God will understand if I give up. And we fall back into practicing sin.

So how do we escape this? (1) Sinlessness is an action word. It takes action on our part. (2) God promises the help we need to achieve it, but He is not going to do it for us. One of the essential characteristics of Biblical faith is trusting God's promises, which implies that we know what those promises are. There are hundreds, most of which deal with character development.

And, (3) we have the church. We confess our sins one to another (James 5:16), not because we need to reveal what we did wrong, but to get help to keep from doing it again. That one-time falling into sin is already forgiven, as John already described in 1:7. We just need to keep those one-time sins from becoming practice.

If we try to overcome our faults privately, what do we do? When we fail, no one knows, so we conveniently forget that sin and excuse ourselves. But if someone else knows, we cannot get away with that. That other person will speak up about our health or finances or children or speech, and hold us to our own commitments, and keep us from excusing sin.

Sinlessness is an action word.

The third action word of the Christian life is love (1 John 3:11 – 18).

For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; not as Cain, who was of the evil one, and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous. Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

"Do not marvel if the world hates you," John wrote. They hated Jesus, too. Go on loving actively.

People do hateful things. And it seems that the more we try to do what's right, the more people find ways to say bad things about it. That's just the way people are. Perhaps they want to tear the rest of the world down to their level, or keep from feeling bad for not doing anything themselves. Perhaps they feel threatened by not being good enough. Perhaps they are just so self-centered that they hate anything in which they are not the center of attention. Perhaps they cannot trust, so everything must have an evil motive. They simply cannot understand that someone would just do something good. There are lots of reasons why people speak evil of those who try to do good. John wrote, "Don't be surprised."

Of course, we do need to inspect ourselves to be certain that they don't hate us because we are obnoxious, or sinful. But John's point is not to get paranoid when the world says nasty things about you. They hated Jesus, too. Just go on loving the brethren.

And notice the kind of love this is. (1) We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. That sounds a bit extreme. (2) We ought to share our worldly goods with the brethren. Verse 17 sounds almost like James 2:20, "Do you not realize, O foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless." Or James 2:15 – 16, "If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' and yet does not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?"

Love is an action word. The definition is "doing what is best for the other person without regard to the effect on me."

We live in a prosperous time, yet should our economy go bad, I am certain that none of us would miss a meal or lack a warm place to sleep, because we have love for the brethren. Knowing that makes life in the kingdom secure.

The fourth action word of the Christian life is confidence. (1 Jn 3:19 – 23).

We shall know by this [back in verse 18, when we see our words and deeds coming together, when we see ourselves being impossibly consistent] that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him, [we know, objectively, that God has accepted us because we are performing at a humanly impossible level] in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us.

Confidence is an action word, too. It is an action word because its result is prayer.

First, we are confident because we act on our love of the brethren. In v19, which can be somewhat confusing, John is saying, "Even when you begin to have second thoughts about yourself, when, in the face of your own failures you begin to doubt you could really be right with God, remember at those times when your own heart condemns you, that God is greater than your heart. He knows what is at the center of your heart. He judges by intention (true intention). So, if we begin to doubt ourselves, look back at the love we have displayed, the love of which we are certain, and restore that confidence and overcome the confusion that besets our hearts sometimes.

Actually, this confidence is harder than it looks. We are not accustomed to being comfortable with our shortcomings being out there where people can see them. We are uncomfortable owing someone else for our success. We are uncomfortable with having needed to be rescued. So, our confidence wanes. It is easy to let our shortcomings become the focus so that we spiral downward into depression. The cure, says John, is to remember that God is greater than how we feel about ourselves.

And with this confidence that, despite my flaws and bumbings, deep down, all I really care about is God, I can ask Him what I need to ask Him, and expect a response. "Whatever we ask, we receive, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing to Him." Some people stop reading too soon. First, note that only those who keep His commandments will receive what they ask – and those commandments were trust God, love the brethren. Second, recall all the times in the Scriptures when people asked for something and received it in a way they had not expected. If you are living so as to be pleasing in His sight, be careful what you ask for. You just might get it.

Paul wanted to go to Rome to preach. I doubt he expected to go there in chains, on trial for his life.

James and John asked to be on Jesus' right and left hands in His kingdom. James was the first apostle to die. John spent years on a prison island because they were leaders in this kingdom.

Have confidence and ask, but be careful.

Becoming like Jesus is a life of action: faith in action, sinlessness in action, love in action, and confidence in action. (2:6) "The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk as He walked." This is a sweeping statement. It covers a multitude of things, but that is what the gospels are for. From them we learn how Jesus walked in this broken world so we can walk that way, too.