

WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

Notes For Lesson One: Introduction, Purpose, & Themes (1 John 1:1-4)

To begin this Spring's study of 1 John, we shall spend most of this week's class time discussing the purpose and goals behind the epistle. We shall first take a look at John's introduction (the first few verses of the book). Then we shall look at his reasons for writing and at some of the major themes that will come up as we study through the book.

John's Introduction (1 John 1:1-4)

While we want to spend most of this week's class discussing 1 John's goals and themes, along with some background information to help us better understand his epistle, we shall start by reading the first few verses of the letter. These will remind us of some important basic ideas, and also will help us to see the important goals John had in mind when writing. Afterwards (below), we shall take a look at some background material.

John opens with an explanation that he intends to proclaim to his readers what he has seen and heard, that is, the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-4). In the first verse, which is reminiscent of the opening of John's gospel account, he refers to the Word of Life that was from the beginning (verse 1):

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

John stresses here, as he did in John 1:1, that the Word was living "at the beginning". But here at the beginning of 1 John, there is an additional point of emphasis, on the tangible evidence for the Word of Life, that is, Jesus. The verse seems almost repetitive in its laborious assertion that Jesus actually could be seen, heard, and touched. Devoted believers may not at first see the reason for such deliberate emphasis, since there is no doubt in our minds or hearts that Jesus really walked the earth and lived in human form. But in John's lifetime, many false teachers had arisen who denied this, teaching that Jesus either was simply a "good teacher", or, more commonly in John's day, that Jesus was a spirit who only appeared to be human, but who did not really live in the flesh. And of course, even today there are more persons who want to explain away Jesus than there are persons who want to believe in him. Some want to deny his divinity, some want to deny his humanity. But John, and the rest of the Bible, remind us that to be a Christian, one must accept and believe in both.

The next verse connects the life Jesus lived on earth with the promise of eternal life (verse 2):

The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

This establishes an important link, that between the physical and the spiritual. John had to face many false teachers (and many others who simply were confused) who considered that flesh and spirit were completely incompatible. Many of these concluded that Jesus could thus not have come in actual fleshly form if he were the Son of God. This led in turn to a variety of false teachings and misunderstandings, as detailed below. It is an inherent part of being a Christian that we must live for a time in this physical world with a physical, fleshly body, despite being (in our inner selves) spiritual beings destined for a different, spiritual home. As long as we live in

this world, we need both to discipline our bodies and nurture our spirits. John will touch on several aspects of this in the course of the epistle.

The next verse, in its call to fellowship, will establish another important theme (verse 3):

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

It is important to understand the biblical concept of "fellowship". It means much more than simply talking with one another, and it even means more than mutual acceptance or cooperation. If this is the only kind of "fellowship" we have with other Christians, we shall have at best a fragile and temporary alliance - whereas God desires that we develop an unbreakable bond with our brothers and sisters in the Lord. The true meaning of "fellowship" means having a common ground, a basis for oneness. Truly we do have this in Christ, provided that we "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:3) John is saying that it is only through knowing, accepting, and believing the full truth about Christ that we can have any real fellowship.

John caps his introduction with a personal comment (verse 4):

We write this to make our joy complete.*

Although we have not yet discussed the reasons why John was motivated to write this epistle, it should be clear from his opening remarks that he is concerned about something that is disturbing the unity and fellowship of believers. He feels obligated to stress some of the most basic aspects of the gospel, and indeed, if we read no further, we almost might conclude that he was addressing unbelievers. (That he is talking specifically to Christians is clear from the way he addresses his audience in many later verses - as an exercise, browse through the epistle and see how many of these you can find.) But he is talking to believers, and is concerned for preserving the fellowship that believers should have. His perspective is such that he can only rejoice* if this fellowship is present - he cannot be content with a superficial peace that glosses over the lack of any common understanding and belief.

* There is also an alternate translation of verse 4, "We write this to make your joy complete". If correct, this would convey a perspective that joy for the readers can only be found in having genuine fellowship with Christ and his church. In both cases, the emphasis is on the importance of having a meaningful fellowship.

Background, Purpose, & Goals for 1 John

We shall now step back from the text to consider what John is hoping to accomplish in writing his epistle. Motivated by his great love for individual Christians, John wanted to protect his readers from the kinds of false teachers (and also unintentional misunderstandings) that began to flourish in the mid- to late-1st century. While he will give several warnings about them, and will also give some ways that incorrect teachings can be recognized, his primary emphasis throughout the letter will be to strengthen the faith, hearts, and ministries of genuine believers in Christ.

The Apostle John is not only a key figure in the New Testament, he was also a legendary figure in the church for many years. He was most probably the last surviving member of the original twelve apostles, and indeed several early church sources suggest that he was still alive and active in ministry long after all of the other apostles had passed away. He was at one time exiled to a remote island by the Romans, but returned and lived many of his later years in Ephesus, a living

legend who was a direct link to the days of Jesus himself. John wrote five New Testament books: his gospel, three epistles, and Revelation. Only in Revelation, though, does the author identify himself by name. Because of this, modern scholars sometimes speculate as to possible alternate authors, but the early Christians unanimously accepted John's authorship of John, 1 John, and Revelation, and only a minority questioned his authorship of 2 John and 3 John. For more details on these kinds of questions, see the recommended sources.

John also does not give a chronological or geographical reference for any of his writings except, again, for Revelation (in which John says he saw these visions while exiled on Patmos). It is usually agreed that his writings were all from the latest part of the first century. In particular, it is usually understood that he wrote 1 John in the 80's or 90's. Some researchers think that it may have been as early as the later 60's, but no earlier. In any case, the significant point is that it was written after the church had been around for more than an entire generation. John wrote to a church that had matured and had established itself, but also to a church that had, over time, begun to experience the difficulties that come with growth and age.

In particular, by the time John wrote 1 John, there were many misunderstandings and false teachings (both theoretical and practical) that had become widespread. While we often (and understandably) bemoan the existence of the many dozens of denominations of "Christianity" in the 21st century, division and false teachings were just as common, and just as painful, for the earliest Christians. The New Testament itself reveals several early controversies that caused division or disruption in the 1st century. Judaizing teachers (promoters of circumcision and the like), "mystery religions" (which caused problems for the Colossians), the Nicolaitans (mentioned in Revelation), and many other false teachings became a problem almost as soon as Christianity expanded beyond its origins in Judea. There were also other problems that arose just beyond the era covered by the New Testament. Asceticism became popular, as did many other aberrant understandings of the Christian lifestyle, and many other divisions were caused not by doctrinal or lifestyle disputes, but simply by the personal ambitions and agendas of prominent leaders.

John's main concern in writing 1 John was probably one particular kind of teaching that was becoming very influential in the late first century. In any era, Christians have great difficulties making sense of the fact that we are physical beings but have a spiritual identity. The nature of the Holy Spirit and the Godhead also are the source of many difficulties even for earnest believers. Because of this, there have always been teachers who found an eager audience for over-simplifications of these realities. In the late first century, there were a number of popular teachers (one in particular, named Cerinthus, is known to have been a particular problem for John himself) who were teaching that flesh and spirit were simply irreconcilable by any means. One implication of this was that Jesus himself could not have been both God's Son and also a real human being with a body of flesh. Thus John wants to stress for us (as in 1:1) that Jesus truly was both. There were also two alternate practical implications to this theory - if this is true, then we must either fight and oppose every desire and wish of our flesh, living an ascetic lifestyle, or we can simply say that our flesh cannot ever be purified, and accordingly we have an excuse for anything it does, as long as we have the right beliefs*. It is this latter teaching that John especially wanted to confront in 1 John, but he also wanted to strengthen the understanding of believers of all of the issues involved. The very thought of separating our earthly existence from our spiritual identity was a fallacy to John, and he felt a need carefully to develop the basic teachings of who we are as Christians.

* This entire complex of misunderstandings and false teachings would come to be known in the second century as "Gnosticism". Gnosticism would become essentially a separate denomination, and would remain so for quite some

time. The title comes from the Greek word for "knowledge", because the Gnostics would develop the teaching that spiritual reality could only be understood through receiving special knowledge from the right teachers.

It is significant that John does not choose to undertake a detailed critique of his opponents. Understanding that the best way to help honestly confused believers was to give them something true and positive, John's antidote is summed up in the key verse that says "we are in Him who is true, even in his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 5:20). John wants to stress identity and truth, not speculation, controversy, or falsehood. He does not want to join the false teachers in pontificating on things he does not understand, but rather he wants to stress, over and over again, a few basic truths that can sustain us in times of confusion or doubt. These basic themes of identity and truth also lead to the other important teachings (see below) that are prominent in 1 John.

Both because of the nature of the letter, and because of John's own style, 1 John is arranged rather differently from, say, a letter by Paul. Whereas Paul tends to argue point-by-point (that is, Paul will say that point A and fact B imply point C, which in turn proves point D, which if taken with fact E will demonstrate point F, and so forth), John instead has several running themes that are gradually developed in greater and greater completeness. We shall get the most out of 1 John if we always try to tie everything back in with the main themes of the book.

You can read more about any of these topics that might interest you in the recommended sources (see separate handout). You may also see me if there is anything you'd like to know more about or would like to study on your own.

For reference, a very simplified outline of the book follows. We shall probably spend two or three weeks on each chapter.

1 John 1:1-1:4	Introduction
1 John 1:5-2:2	Walking in the Light
1 John 2:3-14	Light, Obedience, & Love
1 John 2:15-17	Do Not Love the World
1 John 2:18-2:29	Do Not Be Led Astray
1 John 3:1-10	The Children of God
1 John 3:11-24	Love in Theory & Practice
1 John 4:1-6	Testing the Spirits
1 John 4:7-21	Love: God's, & Ours
1 John 5:1-5	Overcoming the World
1 John 5:6-12	The Testimony About God's Son
1 John 5:13-21	Implications & Closing Comments

Major Themes in 1 John

To conclude our introductory lesson, we shall take a look at some of the most important recurring themes that we shall find as we study 1 John. As we do, consider how these relate to the introduction (1:1-4) and to the reasons John has for writing the book. This will be only a very basic introduction to these themes, and we shall develop and discuss them much more completely as we study 1 John. For now, simply try to keep these ideas in mind as you begin to study the epistle.

Probably the most important idea in 1 John is the simple word "IN". John wants us to know what it means to be "in" God, and to have God "in" us. This idea is simple, but most difficult to grasp, even for the most devoted Christians. It also has many implications that John wishes to

discuss. He wants us to see that being "in" God (and having him "in" us) has many important implications. Conversely, he wants us to know that there are ways we can tell that we are in God, so that we can have confidence.

Early in 1 John, light and darkness is a key theme. These words are used several times in 1:5-2:11. The terms are not used after 2:11, but that is only because he begins to use other words and criteria to describe the important distinction between light and darkness. It is one of John's central ideas that one is either living in the light or living in the darkness: there is no other possibility, and it thus behooves us to know where we are at all times

Sin and forgiveness is not only an important theme in the epistle, but is also one of the difficulties many readers have in studying 1 John. John says several times "no one who lives in him keeps on sinning" (3:6), or something very similar. There is a very important point behind these verses, and one that unfortunately gets obscured by some common misunderstandings.

Finally, 1 John is frequently remembered for its prominent mention of love and of the Spirit. Most of the references to love (there are over 25 in the book) come later in the book, and it is first mentioned in chapter 2 after some of the other themes have been established. Love for God and love for others tie in closely to these other important principles. There is no mention of the Spirit until the last verse of chapter 3, but afterwards John several times refers either to the Spirit, or to a "spirit", which does not usually refer not a mysterious celestial being, but rather to a person's own "spirit", and thus this is John's way of getting us to view teachings and actions from a spiritual perspective. These difficult concepts are again tied in closely with John's concern about being in God and having God in us.

For Further Study

We'll discuss this to some extent in class, but if you have time at home, consider the ways that the message and purpose of 1 John would be significant for you and for other believers today. In particular, consider parallels to the problems and needs that John saw, and consider the ways that the major themes of the book may help you and those around you.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2001

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Selected Sources & References For Study of 1 John

This short bibliography is intended to give you a list of some useful and readily available books that you can use if you wish to study 1 John on your own. For further details, or for direction on planning personal study, you are welcome to see me any time.

Gerald Bray (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*

N.T. Caton, *Commentary on the Minor Epistles* (Restoration Library)

Frank E. Gaebelein (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 12: Hebrews - Revelation*
(the commentary on 1 John was written by Glenn Barker)

David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters* (The Bible Speaks Today)

I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (New International Commentary)

D. Moody Smith, *First, Second & Third John* (Interpretation Commentary)

John Stott, *The Letters of John* (revised) (Tyndale New Testament Commentary)

Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles of Peter, John, & Jude*
(Gospel Advocate Commentaries)

All of the above books have particular strengths. For a first-time study of 1 John concentrating on the important themes without being concerned with technical details, Jackman's book is highly recommended. It is part of a series that is usually ideal for basic thematic and practical study without getting into technical details.

For a more advanced study incorporating extensive background information, and dealing with more of the details of interpretation, Stott's book would probably be my first recommendation, and Marshall's second. Both are thorough and well-researched; Stott's book is preferred since it is less expensive and is more rigorous in adhering closely to the teachings of the Scripture. Smith's book is similar in nature to these, but from a slightly different outlook: the Interpretation Commentaries have a more modernistic perspective, and do not always give Scriptural teachings their full weight and authority. This volume is still quite useful, as the author has some good insights into the implications of 1 John's teachings.

The books by Woods and Caton are by authors from the Churches of Christ, and thus adhere closely to the meaning of the text. They do not, however, have very much background material.

The Expositor's Bible commentary (Gaebelein/Barker) provides a thorough introduction to 1 John, although it is usually only available as part of a large and expensive collection that includes commentaries on several other books. (This is a useful series to have, though, if you want a series that covers every book of the Bible with good background material and analysis.)

Finally, as a companion to any of the other books, the volume in the Ancient Christian Commentary series (the volume edited by Bray) is indispensable if you wish to do a careful study of the difficult verses in 1 John. This series demonstrates the way that each verse was understood and applied by the early Christians. In interpreting difficult verses, this evidence is much more important than the speculations of modern commentators. For that purpose, and for other reasons as well, this volume would be a valuable supplement to any of the above main commentaries.

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Notes For Lesson Two: Walking in the Light (1 John 1:5-2:2)

In last week's introduction, we took note of several important themes that are prominent in 1 John. This week, as we move into 1 John 1:5-2:2, we shall take a careful look at the theme of light and darkness, and at how this connects with another important theme, that of sin and forgiveness. In discussing these topics, John gets to the heart of some theological and practical questions that many Christians find extremely difficult.

Light Or Darkness (1 John 1:5-7)

One of the key themes of the book now appears. John tells us that God is light - perfection, truth, righteousness, and sinlessness. This means that we ourselves must walk in the light if we wish to have fellowship with God. John also immediately connects the concepts of light and darkness with his all-important "in" idea. That is to say, light and darkness (or, righteousness and sinfulness) should not simply be abstract concepts to us. They are realities, and we are always living in one or the other. Nor are they arbitrary concepts, but are intimately connected with God's own nature.

John first says simply that God is light (verse 5):

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

"Light" connotes many things: God's perfection, his righteousness, his truth, his sinlessness. We associate God himself with light, because of his qualities, and we also can associate "light" with the way that God reveals what is in our own lives and hearts. As John says, there is no darkness at all in God. That is, there is nothing negative in his own nature or character, and there is also no darkness in his vision. Nothing can hide or be hidden from God. These ideas are significant in many ways, but not least in that they explain why God must oppose sin. Both God's definition of what constitutes sin, and his attitude towards sin, are necessary consequences of who he is.

Study Suggestion: If you have time, you may want to do a more thorough study of the ways that "light" is used, both in 1 John and in the rest of the Bible. It is an important image, for reasons described here and for others we have not mentioned.

One important consequence of this is that God can have no fellowship with the darkness (verse 6):

If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.

Remember from last week that "fellowship" means much more than associating with or accepting one another - it means having a common ground, a firm basis for relationship and unity. With that in mind, it is easy to see why God cannot have fellowship with those in the darkness. There is an inherent contradiction in the claim that a person can act self-indulgently or irresponsibly and yet maintain a relationship with God. No matter how popular it may be to believe such a thing, it cannot be true. Anyone who wants to know God or to be with God must

"walk in the light". Nor is it enough to believe passively in the right things - we must actively walk in the light.

When we do walk in the light, we can then enjoy both fellowship and purity (verse 7):

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

John will soon illuminate what he does and does not mean by "walking in the light", but the phrase just by itself is quite suggestive. To walk means to progress, to continue, and the reference to light is meant to direct us to God's own qualities and nature, as John has just emphasized. If we live a life of righteousness, avoiding sin and embracing truth, we are walking in the light. When we do so, the consequences flow naturally from God's own character. First of all, we build fellowship with one another and with God, because God and his truth automatically form the basis for true and lasting fellowship. John also mentions the purification through Jesus that comes from walking in the light. As we know from so many other Scriptures, it is only through Christ that we mortal, fleshly, sinful humans can connect with God and his perfection. Jesus is the source of our relationship with God, the atonement for our sin (as John mentions below), and much more.

Before moving on, we should take note of two essential facts in understanding sin ("darkness"). First, sin is not arbitrary. God does not determine what constitutes sin based on whims or personal preferences, but based on his own nature. He always acts consistently with who he is. It is a great hindrance to understanding God when humans view his commands as an arbitrary display of authority. There is always an important and spiritual reason for anything God tells us to do or not to do. We may often be unable to understand what this reason may be in a given instance, but it is important to remember that God always has reasons for his commands.

Second, sin is not, and can never be, impersonal. It is a delusion when humans think that they can sin without doing any harm. This is why John is using such imagery as light and darkness to discuss sin and righteousness, rather than using only words such as "law" or "commands". Sin is sin because it damages our relationship with God - this is, in a sense, the very definition of sin. And John is reminding us that those who live in darkness automatically exclude themselves from fellowship with those in the light. It is not possible for a human to live in sin without damaging his or her relationships with others, through undermining any grounds for real fellowship. Later in the letter, John will even more thoroughly tie in love with obedience and with "walking in the light".

Study Suggestion: It might help you understand these concepts even better if you take a few of God's most familiar or important commands, and study them to answer the following questions: (a) how does the command flow from God's own nature, that is, how is it consistent with and based on who God is?; (b) In what ways does following the command help a person's relationship with God and fellowship with other believers - and how does disobeying it damage or threaten relationships and fellowships?

Sin & Forgiveness (1 John 1:8-10)

Given John's bold statement that only those who "walk in the light" can have fellowship with God, it is important to understand exactly what that means. In particular, John tells us that it does not mean complete sinlessness, but rather has to do with our attitude towards the sin in our

lives. Unlike God, every human is imperfect, and is prone to sin. It is vital to our relationship with God that we are honest about our own weakness and imperfection.

John first states that we cannot ever claim to be without sin (verse 8):

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

John emphatically tells us that any human claim to be perfect or sinless is simply a delusion, an act of self-deception. There are both unbelievers and those who claim to be believers who have deceived themselves into thinking it is possible for them to be so righteous that they can avoid sin for an indefinite period, but John gives the lie to any such attempt. Such self-deception, containing as it does a distorted and unrealistic view of oneself, inevitably leads to a distorted view of God. John also implies that it has the further consequence of driving us away from the light of truth and drawing us into the darkness of rationalization, lies, and further self-deceit.

But there is another alternative (verse 9):

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

John wants us to realize that there is no reason why we should not simply confess our sins! There is no downside of confession, other than a loss of pride. Confession brings both forgiveness and purification. Indeed, it is an important part of God's own nature that he wants to forgive. His desire to have fellowship with us is greater than his desire to punish sin - he waits only for us to make it possible for him to forgive us by accepting his offer of grace and salvation through Christ. Note that here, John is not even dealing with confession as a verbal statement, but as part of our self-awareness and our attitude towards ourselves and our lives. It is of course beneficial at times openly to acknowledge our sins to other believers, but what is really essential to forgiveness is to have the right attitude. (And it is entirely possible, of course, to confess verbally but not in one's heart truly to regret or admit wrong-doing.)

Study Suggestion: John covers here in a few sentences several profound points about human sinfulness. Later in the letter, he will help us better understand some of the aspects of these questions, but it could also be beneficial to you to study some of these concepts further on your own. That is, consider your attitude towards your own sin - how does it match with what John is talking about? When you are convicted of a sin, how do you usually handle it? What result does this produce in your relationship with God and with other Christians - do you draw closer or drift farther away? The result of how you handle the awareness of your own sin will tell you a lot about whether you are handling it in the way that God wishes you to.

John now returns briefly to the other, negative side of human attitudes towards sin (verse 10):

If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Besides its other consequences, denying our sinfulness is an implicit statement that God is lying to us when he says "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24). God tells us the truth, and the truth is that we sin. Note an important point: in saying this, John wants his readers to avoid this error, but more importantly he is trying to strengthen them against the false teachers who were proclaiming their own sinlessness. There are persons who like to present themselves as especially strong and immune to sin, and they can be very intimidating to the average

believer. It is good for us to remember that not only are we ourselves saved only by grace, but so is everyone else.

A technical note: Some commentators on 1 John waste a lot of ink trying to determine the distinction between "if we claim to be without sin" (v. 8) and "if we claim we have not sinned" (v. 10). There is no good reason to suppose that these mean two different things - John is referring in both cases to the same basic practice of self-delusion, and simply is pointing out different consequences of the same problem in the two verses.

Ideal & Reality (1 John 2:1-2)

"Walking in the light" does not mean that we must be completely sinless and perfect. What is more, it also does not mean that we ourselves must make up for our own sins by some kind of sacrifice or meritorious service. These two short verses summarize some powerful realities - realities that to the fleshly mind seem to be in conflict. God wants very much for us to avoid sin, but knowing our perpetual weakness, he has already provided for forgiveness when we do sin.

John spells out very succinctly the ideal and the reality (verse 1):

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

The ideal is clear: "so that you will not sin". Let there be no mistake: God hates sin, has always hated it, and always will hate it. There is never a time we can please him by sinning, and never a time we won't please him by avoiding sin. It is not possible for him to have any other response. But there is also a reality, which God understands and accepts even better than we do. He knows how weak and fleshly we can be, and he knows how often we are going to sin. So God has therefore already provided forgiveness through the blood of Christ, for those who walk in the light. We do not have to attain forgiveness by our own merit, as this would be an inherent contradiction.

Study Suggestion: There are of course many aspects of this that deserve careful study, so this is only one suggestion - what do you think John means when he says that Jesus "speaks to the Father in our defense"? Consider also Romans 8:34 - remembering, of course, to keep both verses in context. You might also want to see how these verses are phrased in different Bible versions.

The fleshly mind sees an irreconcilable conflict between God's hatred of sin and God's acceptance of sinful humans into fellowship with him. And it sees an impossibility in using grace to motivate humans not to sin. In John's lifetime, the Gnostics over-simplified the issues involved and created a false religion. In our own experience, there are also many false teachers, and others who are simply misguided, who formulate extremist teachings because they cannot understand how to reconcile these points. But Jesus Christ is the synthesis, the resolution, the mediator of this conflict as well as the bridge for the chasm between flesh and spirit. Any attempt to explain these concepts without focusing on the blood of God's Son will fail, but anyone who grasps who Jesus is and what he did will be able eventually to see more clearly God's truth in many other areas as well.

Study Suggestion: It is important to see how Jesus makes sense of seemingly contradictory points like these, although it is not at all easy to do so, or to explain it in our own words. We all have different struggles in applying God's truth to our lives, but for many believers the problem comes down simply to accepting that the words of the Bible apply to ourselves in particular, instead of being merely abstract teachings. For example, consider some of the specific ways that you personally "fall short of the glory of God". Try then to study what 1 John and other Scriptures tell us about grace, and prayerfully consider how these teachings apply to those specific sins you may have committed. The goal is to hit the difficult balance between realizing how truly ugly our sin is, while at the same time joyfully accepting God's

grace for our sins, rather than trying desperately to make up for them. This is not impossible, because the Scriptures teach us the importance of both!

John also tells us that Jesus was a universal sacrifice (verse 2)

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

John is not, of course, telling us that Jesus automatically provided grace to everyone in the world whether they believe or not, but rather is telling us that God's grace through Jesus is powerful enough to extend all over the world, and to permeate the whole life of any person. There is no one who cannot be saved if he or she is willing to walk in the light. We so often downplay the power of grace, because we foolishly think that preaching grace boldly will encourage slackness and unrighteous behavior. But Scripture tells us otherwise, for as Paul says to Titus, "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:11-12). Preaching and living grace in all its power is the best way to help ourselves and others learn to walk in the light.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2001

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WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

Notes For Lesson Three: Light, Obedience, & Love (1 John 2:3-14)

In last week's study, John introduced the important concepts of "light" and "darkness". In the verses that we shall study this time, he ties in these concepts with at least two other important themes: obedience, and love. This is part of John's overall plan of trying to help us see how everything in the Christian's life and identity fits together as a whole.

Obedience & Love (1 John 2:3-6)

In the middle of chapter 2, John discusses several fundamental components of our relationship with God. These can be considered in either of two ways. First, they are, in a sense, a test of whether someone has a relationship with God, and so they can either re-assure us that we are in God, or they can show that someone (or perhaps oneself) is not walking in the light. Second, they describe the things that go into a relationship with God, and how these things fit together. The first component (or test) is the most rudimentary one, that of basic obedience (2:3-6). Then he will talk about love (2:7-11), and then after a digression in verses 12-14, he will talk about being separate from the world (2:15-17) and believing in Jesus as the Christ (2:18-29). We'll leave these last two topics for future classes.

John begins this section by linking knowing God and obeying his commands (verse 3):

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.

In saying this, John rules out any possibility of having a relationship with God without fully accepting his authority and power. To know God, in any meaningful sense of the term, means that we have an understanding and awareness of who he is, and this in turn means we must be conscious at all times of his omnipotence and omniscience. To know God at all, and then to disregard his commands or take them lightly, is a contradiction.

Make sure to remember what John is trying to do! This is of course meant to exhort us to obedience, but not by making us panic over whether we are really saved. John is making this statement in a positive sense: he is writing to believers who have been troubled and tormented by overbearing false teachers pretending to have superior knowledge and more dynamic ministries. John says simply that those who live a life of basic obedience - and it is understood from verses 1-2 that this by no means implies perfection or sinlessness - are the ones who know God.

It is important to recognize another kind of false claim (verse 4):

The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

Once again, this is directed first of all at those false teachers who pronounced the flesh-pleasing doctrine that a believer could do anything he or she wanted, as long as he or she believed the right things. Just as it does today, this kind of falsehood not only led astray some believers who were looking for excuses, it also caused great difficulty for sincere believers who were thrown into confusion, wondering if their sacrifices and perseverance were worthwhile after all. John

re-assures them, as he re-assures us, that indeed a life of obedience is important if we wish to live by the truth.

John now makes a link with love, which will also be discussed much more later on (verse 5a):

But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him.

From a fleshly perspective, love and obedience seem to be in opposition to each other. But John is saying that they fit together, along with the other components of our relationship with God that he is discussing. There are actually many links between love and obedience. What John is specifically saying is that our obedience allows God's love to "be made complete" - that is, that when we obey God, we are truly able to love one another and are truly able to experience God's love for us. Disobedience is a barrier to both of these, because our self-will, if unrestrained, will seek only to please the flesh. This makes it impossible to feel God's love, because our earthly selves will never appreciate God's greatest blessings, or even notice most of them. And it is only when we accept God's wisdom and authority unconditionally that we can truly love others, because only then are we able to perceive their most important needs and to have the spiritual insight needed to meet those needs. Without knowing God, the best we can do for other humans is to give them very temporary relief from the problems in their lives.

Study Suggestion: In order fully to understand the link between love and obedience, it is necessary to clear our minds of the erroneous definitions of these words, as they are often used around us. Try to define what the Bible means by "love" and what it means by "obedience", using Scriptures in 1 John and elsewhere.

John sums up what he is saying as follows (verse 5b-6):

This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

In once again using the verb "walk", John stresses, as he did before, that he is advocating an ongoing perspective in our lives of embracing God and the things he teaches us. To "walk as Jesus did" is an all-encompassing call to love, obey, and trust. Remember that John is trying to encourage and strengthen his audience by saying this. That is, he is not trying to convict them that they are not walking in Jesus, but instead he means to re-assure them that this is the right way to follow Jesus. They do not need to learn the weird teachings of the proto-Gnostics or any other select group, but rather they simply need to commit themselves to walking as Jesus did.

Study Suggestion: We have commented that the problems that concerned John were by no means limited to his lifetime. Consider carefully, then, how these teachings can help you focus more clearly on what God wants from you, and how they can relieve any uncertainty as to what God is calling you to do with your life.

Love: An Old Command Made New (1 John 2:7-11)

John now presents a second, and deeper, component or criterion of one's relationship with God: the moral test of love. He presents it as a command that in itself has always been important to God, but one that has also taken on new significance and importance in the New Covenant. The importance of the call to love one another is always obvious, but because of our constant tendency towards selfishness, God finds it necessary frequently to re-iterate it. John says that, in fact, this is an "old" command (verse 7):

Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard.

The need to love one another (as he will soon specify) is fundamental to any kind of relationship with God. It is essential because it flows directly from God's own unchanging nature and will. Since God loves every person just as much as he loves us, there is no such thing as following God or knowing God without taking into account how our lives affect those around us. And it is not possible to be a Christian in isolation, without human relationships. We cannot ever meet all the needs around us, and we will often fall short even of the things we wished to do for others, but it is both possible and important to strive to love as part of our relationship with God.

This "old" truth takes on new significance in Christ (verse 8):

Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

Just as Jesus fulfilled the law, brought the Spirit to all who believe, and replaced a ministry of animal sacrifices for temporary atonement with a more perfect sacrifice that brought unlimited grace, he also brought a new significance to the meaning of love. He showed us God's love more completely than ever had been revealed to Moses or Abraham, and he showed us also how to love each other in a way that transcends anything possible under law alone.

Study Suggestion: We are only briefly discussing the ways that Jesus makes this "old" command a "new" command. See if you can give a more complete explanation of what this means, and see also if you can tie this in with the many other aspects of the Old Covenant that Jesus made more complete &/or more perfect. The book of Hebrews gives us many of these parallels.

There is a link between hate and darkness, just as there is between love and light (verses 9-10):

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.

These are obvious but important connections. As he has done before, and will do again many times, John presents the Christian life as an integrated whole. We either live in the light, know God, obey God, and love our brothers and sisters, or we live in the darkness, implicitly call God a liar, deceive ourselves, and hate our brothers and sisters. Once again, make sure to remember why John is saying this. He wants us to remember that Christianity is a comprehensive whole, and that a genuine Christian is complete and consistent in his or her beliefs, claims, and actions. Those who present Christianity in some other way are simply wrong. Those of us who are pursuing this ideal, no matter how fallibly we attempt to practice it, are the ones who are walking in the light.

Light and darkness also affect the direction of our lives (verse 11):

But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

Just as physical light enables us to see clearly and to avoid injury as we walk around, so too do living in the light and living in love ensure that we won't stumble so often over the obstacles that Satan and the world so often put in our path. But living in hate, or any other form of darkness,

blinds us. Those who walk in sin are never able to see anything clearly. They have a distorted view of themselves, of God, of their lives, and of other persons. Once again, many different things fit together, whether we are in the light or in the darkness.

"I Write to You": A Basis For Relationship (1 John 2:12-14)

This short, poetic passage is something of a digression from John's discussion of light, obedience, love, and other components of our relationship with God, to which he will return later in the chapter. In these verses, he simply wants to re-emphasize some of the important things that have motivated him to write his epistle. Every Christian has received some great spiritual blessings, and has won important spiritual victories. These give us a basis for an eternal relationship with God, and for lasting relationships with each other (verses 12-14).

*I write to you, dear children,
because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.*
*I write to you, fathers,
because you have known him who is from the beginning.*
*I write to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.*
*I write to you, dear children,
because you have known the Father.*
*I write to you, fathers,
because you have known him who is from the beginning.*
*I write to you, young men,
because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome
the evil one.*

There are three groups that John addresses, telling each why he is writing to them*. He addresses "dear children", "fathers", and "young men". Commentators and expositors in the early church were unanimous in understanding these in a spiritual sense, rather than referring literally to physical age or status. "Children" can obviously be understood as applying to Christians in a general sense, although some commentators point out that it also could refer to very new Christians. "Fathers" is a reference to the spiritually mature, particularly including those with spiritual responsibilities. Young men, likewise, most probably refers to spiritual growth, not physical age. John writes like this as a way of stressing the spiritual relationship that we have with God and with each other. Our spiritual identity is so much more important than any of the criteria that the world would use to define who we are.

* Or why he has written - it is possible to translate the second set of "I write to you" statements as instead "I have written to you". Setting aside needless speculation, it is most probable that this is solely a poetic device. The early Christian commentators did not believe that this variation held any particular significance.

John cites several specific reasons why he is writing, that is, there are several things he has in common with his readers as a basis for fellowship, which he wants to preserve and strengthen. These are all basic spiritual truths, the kinds of things that we so often are reminded of without always stopping to consider their significance. We shall look primarily at the points themselves. There is some significance to the ways that the spiritual blessings are mentioned in addressing specific groups of believers, and you could study this on your own, but the main point here is the ways that having shared in these spiritual blessings gives us a basis for relationships with each other and with God.

Most basically, Christians have had their sins forgiven. Any two persons who have shared in this, and who fully understand it, are able to rejoice in this great news. It is always exciting to share any good news with someone else who can appreciate it, and the news of God's grace and forgiveness meets the most urgent needs in anyone's life. John also mentions twice that we have known "him who is from the beginning". That is, we are bound together by a common knowledge of God and a common relationship with him. This is a much stronger bond than merely having human friends or relatives in common, because other humans were not "from the beginning"; they are not eternal and are not immortal. We have also shared in overcoming the evil one; only Christians can ever have any lasting relief from the unending assaults of Satan on human souls, lives, minds, and hearts. Not only is this a wonderful individual blessing, it also provides common ground for understanding and ministry. And the Word of God lives in each of us. We have all made a home in our hearts for the Spirit of God, and have committed ourselves to a life of devotion and submission to God's Word and will. While we shall still have differences of perspective on a regular basis, the list of important truths that we see the same way is much more important.

John is reminding us that these kinds of bonds are a much stronger basis for our relationships than any worldly or fleshly connection we can have with other persons.

Study Suggestion: See first how many more things you could add to John's list - that is, name some more things that you have in common with any Christian that you do not have in common with those who are unbelievers. Then consider the practical ways that each of these truths - the ones John mentions and the ones you thought of on your own - can affect our relationships if we concentrate on this common ground that we have with one another.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2001

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WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

Notes For Lesson Four: Do Not Love the World (1 John 2:15-17)

After doing some review, we shall move on to the third of the four essential components of a healthy relationship with God that John discusses in 1 John 2. In the first part of the chapter, John has told us that both obedience and love for our brothers are essential parts of "walking in the light". Now he wants us to consider our identity, when he tells us, "Do not love the world."

Since we have now introduced so many important topics, we shall begin the class time with a more thorough review than usual, before moving ahead. As you study 1 John, make sure always to remember that one of John's main goals is to show us how everything in Christianity fits together as part of an integrated whole. This is why it is important to review the ideas as we go along.

So far in chapter two, John has presented two essential components of living in the light: obedience (or, the "moral test"; 2:3-6) and love (the "social test"; 2:7-11).

Do Not Love the World (1 John 2:15-17)

This, the third of the four essentials or criteria that John introduces in the chapter, could be called the "identity test" of one's relationship with God. His call is simple but far-reaching, easy to understand but difficult to put into practice. Remember, as always, that John does want us to see how vital it is that we live as God called us to, but at the same time he is not trying to discourage sincere, honest believers. He wants to re-assure us that, if we are indeed living for God and not for this world, then we have made the right choice. We should not allow ourselves to be distracted by or envious of those who have chosen to seek their treasure in this lifetime.

In verse 15, John makes his familiar statement that we should not love the world:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

John continues to emphasize the sharp distinction between light and darkness, and here the implication is that it is not possible to love the world and still have the love of God within us. As James said, when we choose to become friends with the world we make ourselves enemies of God (James 4:4). John is not, of course, advocating withdrawal from the world, or any other form of extremist behavior. Rather, he is stressing that a genuine believer is not at home in this world, and does look for hope or for meaning to life from the things of this world. It is a different way of saying what Jesus meant when he said, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). We must therefore choose which shall be our priority: God or the world. Once we make that choice, many other things fall into place.

John next describes for us the things of "the world" (verse 16)

For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world.

He deliberately characterizes the things of the world as inherently typified by craving and boasting, to show us the basic emptiness of living for them. Even pagans, of course, do many things without overtly sinful motives or goals, but in the end anything not done out of faith in

God will, of necessity, fail to provide any lasting satisfaction. We are not of this world, but rather are created in God's image, so how could anything of this world be more satisfying than God? Worldly desires are agonizing and frustrating when unfulfilled, but even worse, they are most often disappointing and disillusioning when they are fulfilled. This, in turn, is why John adds boasting to his characterization of loving this world. The worldly need to boast about what they have and what they do, because deep inside they know that their possessions and achievements have no lasting value. So they must desperately attempt to convince not only others, but themselves, that what they have sought is of value after all.

In saying that "everything in the world ... comes not from the Father but from the world", the apostle is not referring to objects in or inhabitants of the world, so much as he refers to the worldly mind-set and perspective that he has just described. The physical elements of this world, the living creatures in it, and the like, most certainly were created by God, and only have existence because of God. So this is not what he means - rather, he is pointing out that the cravings, the boasting, the envy, the jealousy, and the other sins that characterize those who hanker after earthly treasure - none of these come from God. To judge whether we are from God or from the world, we should not decide based on how much we have in this world, but rather by our attitude towards what we have. Do we gratefully receive whatever God gives us in this life, and remain content with what we have, not clamoring for more? Then we are from God. Or, do we feel a need for more, a need to boast about what we have already, a need to compete with others for fleshly pleasure, material goods, or earthly fame, power, and privilege? In that case, we are most definitely from the world.

Study Suggestion: This is a most important distinction. So many Christians either wander off into extremist attitudes or lapse into a lackadaisical lifestyle because they fail to see that what is important is not how much we have, but our attitude towards it. Attitude and perspective are the most important, both in determining how happy we will be with what we have, and in how this affects our relationship with God and our relationships with others. See how many other Scriptures you can find that discuss this topic, study how they fit in with what John is saying here, and consider how you can observe these principles demonstrated in your life and the lives of other persons.

John also reminds us of a very important distinction between God and the world (verse 17):

The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

The world and its desires are all temporary. Even the truly positive things in this world will not last, and therefore it is foolish to place too much hope, security, or confidence in them. This is why no measure of earthly blessing can ever provide lasting peace or security, because even if we have deceived ourselves - that is, our flesh and our human minds - and those around us into thinking that this world can satisfy us, our spirits within us still know better, and long for God. Thus the apostle is by no means trying to discourage anyone, or to spoil anyone's fun, or to make us insecure, in warning us against loving the world. He is telling us this for our good, because the only permanence in our existence is found in God and in the things of God. Knowing God, following God's will, and living in the light enable us to enjoy spiritual blessings that we shall never lose.

We should therefore learn both to recognize and to resist the lure of the world. The traps set by worldly desires are not always obvious. Remember again John's main concern, namely the influential false teachers he was encountering. Although they claimed to speak for God, they were in fact filled with worldly desires and ambitions. It is quite possible for humans to use even Christianity itself as a vehicle for attempting to fulfill worldly cravings. But in convincing us of the emptiness of the world, John also hopes to re-assure those of us who already realize our need for God. He wants us to know that we have left behind nothing of real value in this world,

and that we should continue to walk in the light, regardless of the activities of those around us who prefer to remain in the darkness.

Introduction to 1 John 2:18-29 - "Do Not Be Led Astray"

We shall study this passage more carefully next time, but shall introduce it now, so that we can see how John's main points fit together. John tells us that we must believe (and teach) the truth about Jesus if we wish to walk in the light, and he makes a direct appeal for his readers not to be "led astray". This passage could be called the doctrinal or theological test of a relationship with God. Even in John's lifetime, there were many who wanted to downplay the importance of adhering closely to inspired truth, but in any era this will always remain essential, regardless of the whims and fashions of popular opinion.

John has a strong term for those who teach falsely about Jesus, calling them "antichrists" (verses 18 and 22). It is important to grasp the significance of this label. The popular understanding of "antichrist", that is, of some powerful super-villain, is erroneous. John's use of the term is not only more Scripturally sound (by definition!), it is also more merited, since those who promote false teachings in the name of Jesus are more dangerous to the body of Christ than any external threat.

To help us from being led astray, John offers two powerful defenses for the believer. He reminds us that we have an anointing from the Holy One (verses 20 and 27), and he reminds us of one of his favorite concepts: truth (verses 20-21). Our anointing is proof that we are in Him and that He is in us, and that what we know is the truth. The truth, in turn, tells us that we can know God without yielding to the distractions of intimidating false teachers.

John also stresses the unity of the Father and the Son in connection with all of these ideas. Those in the light have both the Father and the Son, while those in the darkness, such as the false teachers, have neither (verses 22-24). Everything fits together, and to John there is no gray area. And so, John advises, let us not be led astray or distracted, but rather let us simply continue in him (verses 27-28), and continue walking in the light, just as we have been doing.

Study Suggestion: We shall cover these topics in more detail next week, but even now you can probably see how they relate to the other aspects of our relationship with God that John has discussed. One thing John wants us to see is how all of these fit together as a coherent whole. That is, for example, when we grow in our love, this in turn helps us to be more obedient, more committed to the truth, and so forth. Or, when we pull ourselves away from the world, this in turn helps us to become more obedient to God, and to love more deeply those others who also are seeking God with their lives. As you have time, consider the four basic areas that John has discussed in this chapter, and study how growth in each of them affects our growth in all of the others in turn.

Next week, we shall go back and cover the ideas in this passage in much more detail.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2001

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WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

Notes For Lesson Five: Do Not Be Led Astray (1 John 2:18-29)

We shall now look more carefully at this passage, which we briefly introduced last week. Along with obedience, love, and a spiritual identity, another essential part of "walking in the light" is that we believe and teach the truth about Jesus. Sound and truthful teaching is necessary in order that we not be led astray, either by the world or by false teachers and the distractions they cause.

Truth Vs. Lies (1 John 2:18-23)

The fourth of the essentials or criteria that John introduces in chapter 2 is the call to believe and teach the truth. This could be called the doctrinal or theological test of one's relationship with God. One of light's qualities is that it illuminates, and makes it impossible to hide falsehood. Therefore, those who walk in the light must always live by the truth. Those who make up their own teachings, however clever or popular, have returned to the darkness. Therefore the apostle pleads earnestly that we not be led astray.

He begins by telling us that there will be "antichrists" in the "last hour" (verses 18-19):

Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

John's usage of the term "the last hour" is best understood as a general reference to the post-resurrection era, in which it is understood both that God's plan of salvation has now been completely revealed, and also that at any time Jesus may return to call his own to him and to initiate the final judgment of the world. "Last" thus describes this period in both of these respects. The use of the last "hour" is found only here in 1 John, but there are several other references* to "the last days" in the New Testament, and these have the same basic meaning.

* These references are as follows: Acts 2:17, 2 Timothy 3:1, Hebrews 1:2, James 5:3, 2 Peter 3:3. As a study suggestion, you could look up these references - establishing their contexts, of course - and consider the following: (i) How is the phrase being used in each of these cases; (ii) Why is the word "last" appropriate to describe this period; (iii) What implications should this have in our own perspective on our lives and our world?

The apostle also introduces another idea that is important to understand, that of "antichrists". We shall soon confirm (in verse 22) that John is using this term to apply specifically to the false teachers who are causing so much trouble for the church and for him. It is quite a strong term, and it is important to understand not only its correct meaning, but also to see why the apostle considers it an appropriate description for these individuals. The word "christ" simply means, "anointed one". Anointing, in turn, literally refers to a pouring or rubbing with oil, such as was often done to designate a new king, or done in connection with religious or ceremonial appointments. To "anoint" thus refers in a broader sense to a formal or solemn designation or appointment. This is why Jesus of Nazareth was called, "the Christ", since he had been appointed, or chosen, by God the Father to carry out the ministry of atonement, sacrifice, and reconciliation. The term "antichrist", then, literally means the opposite or negative of the anointed or chosen one.

There are only five references in the entire Bible to "antichrist" or "antichrists", and all are in 1 John or 2 John. (Two are in this verse, one is below in verse 22, and the other two are 1 John 4:3 and 2 John 1:7.) Notice that every one of them refers simply to false teachers. The popular conception of "antichrist" is that of an obviously evil super-villain, but this image has no solid biblical support. It comes from confusing the use of the term "antichrist" with the portrayal of the "beast" (or beasts) in Revelation. The beasts are, at least on a literal level, similar to the popular conception of an "antichrist", but they are never given that name. Note that John wrote all of these books, and he chose to use different terms to describe these two different concepts, so we ought to be careful to use them only as they are used in Scripture.

The strong term "antichrist" may seem like an exaggeration when applied not to some villainous monster, but merely to a teacher of error, but this is exactly John's point. While it may be the Hitlers and the Attila the Huns who cause the most misery in this world, and whom the world sees as its "antichrists", it is the purveyors of falsehoods about God and his salvation who do the most serious damage, since they destroy not only lives, but souls. Satan is described elsewhere as the father of lies (John 8:44), because falsehood is his most lethal weapon.

Having spoken of the "antichrists", John now reminds the believer of two defenses against the ravages they cause. These defenses are not powerful by earthly standards, but for the believer who is guided by them, they can produce security, confidence, and joyful living(verses 20-21):

But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth.

The concept of believers having received an anointing is meant as a deliberate contrast to these false teachers, whom John has described literally as "anti-anointed". Our own anointing from the Holy One brings into play the concept of the Spirit, whom John will discuss in later chapters at greater length. Compare these verses in 1 John with 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (see also 2 Corinthians 5:5). Our anointing from the Spirit is described in other Scriptures* as a counselor, a deposit, a guarantee, and in numerous other ways. Later in the epistle, John will look further at just a few of the many powerful implications of having God's Spirit living within us.

* Study Suggestion: Look for other Scriptures that describe the Holy Spirit in these and in other ways. Consider how these specific aspects of the Spirit can help us to deal with the kinds of concerns that John was writing about.

Going hand-in-hand with our anointing is our awareness of the truth. This is one of the places where John makes it clear to whom he is writing: "you do know it (the truth)". And indeed every New Testament Christian not only knows the important basic truths about Christianity, but also knows the source of truth, so that even when new questions arise, we can avoid being "blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Ephesians 4:14).

But these false teachers stand in opposition to the truth (verses 22-23):

Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist--he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Perhaps the most common cause of false teaching is simply that the truth gets "old", and many humans with worldly minds feel an urge to "run ahead" (2 John 1:9). But John reminds us in

both epistles that to give in to this urge for something different carries the danger of losing both the Father and the Son. Most specifically, he calls us to remember that no one can have a relationship with God the Father except through Jesus Christ. We either have both, or neither. We thus have not only the responsibility to choose to live by the truth, but also to learn to recognize it by applying the principles John is setting forth.

Study Suggestion: Consider and study the implications of 1 John 2:23 and 2 John 9, namely that there is no way to God except through Jesus. Also see how many other Scriptures you can find that express this principle. Reflect on the implications of this, both as they affect a believer and as they affect unbelievers.

Remain in Him (1 John 2:24-29)

John concludes his discussion of the basics of "walking in the light" with a call to "remain in him". In one sense, this is a challenge, a call to persevere and to embrace more fully the truths of Christianity. But it is also meant as an encouragement, as John assures his audience that they do simply need to remain in God, and that they do not have to please those who teach extraneous philosophies and innovative doctrines. Neither the proto-Gnostics who were active in John's day, nor the many similar individuals who disturb and distress believers in many eras, can prevent us from remaining in him and in the truth.

John wants us to see the connection between our commitment and God's promise (verses 24-25):

See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us--even eternal life.

The apostle continues to return to the key concept of "In". What we heard remains in us: in our minds, in our hearts, in our lives. Then we shall remain in Jesus and in God. And of course, God lives in us as well. All of these "In" concepts fit together - they either are all true or are all false. If we remain in the truth, we remain in Jesus, and thus in God, and in turn God lives in us. But if one element is removed, the rest also fall apart.

And this all leads up to the promise of eternal life. For a Christian to be confident and joyful, to be ready and willing to live as God calls us to, it is imperative that this promise be real and believable. In John's introduction (1:2), he linked Jesus' life on earth, as God's Son come in the flesh, and our hope of eternal life, as physical, mortal beings who will be made spiritual and immortal. Here he makes an additional link with the promise, in telling us that, because we are in God and he is in us in this world, we can thus know that eternal life is indeed waiting for us. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:22 and 5:5 (see above), the presence of the living Spirit of God is a guarantee of what is to come.

He also tells us more about our anointing and its implications (verses 26-27):

I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit--just as it has taught you, remain in him.

The anointing of the Spirit will remain in us and will teach us. In John's gospel*, he quotes Jesus on several occasions assuring his followers that the Spirit would come to make a home within them, to teach them and to convict the world. Here in the epistle, John wants us to see some of the implications of this. If we have the Spirit, there is no need to listen to false human teachers,

no matter how intricate their philosophy or how pleasing their words and teachings. Our call is not to search for additional sources of truth, but rather to remain in the one source of truth.

* Study Suggestion: Read the passages about the coming of the Spirit in the gospel of John, especially in chapters 14 and 16, and compare them with the teachings here in 1 John. How do the teachings in the gospel illuminate what John says in the epistle about our anointing with the Spirit? How do the teachings in 1 John (both here and later on) show us how to put into practice some of the assurances that Jesus made in the gospel?

John now re-iterates this, one of his major practical goals, the call to continue in him (verses 28-29):

And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.

Among the fruits of remaining in God are confidence, security (lack of shame), and hope. Compare these with the fruits of following human beings: intimidation, insecurity, and uncertainty. Only God's own righteousness, not any human virtue, guarantees that following him, and walking in his light, will lead to a fruitful life in every way. Those who walk in the light (who do what is right) can know that they are born of him and that they have the fruit that comes from such a privileged birth.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2001

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WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

Notes For Lesson Six: The Children of God (1 John 3:1-10)

Having laid out several of the most important essentials in a believer's relationship with God, John now turns to a more detailed look at the identity that Christians have as God's children. He also shows us that this identity is closely connected with how we ought to live.

Now We Are Children of God (1 John 3:1-3)

These few verses contain one of the most important ideas in the book. John has just described what a relationship with God is all about, in a way that both challenges us and encourages us. Now he tells us that those who have accepted the gospel, and who have committed themselves to this kind of life, have acquired a new identity as children of God. This new identity convinces us of God's great love, and gives us a new and lasting hope. It also gives us a reason to live as God has called us to.

The apostle first calls attention to the great love that God shows us in calling us his (verse 1):

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

It is indeed God's love that gives us our entire identity. God's love motivated the creation, and it motivated the redemption. It defines who we are, and defines where we are going. The world has many different ways of identifying us, but God has one way: we are his children. Physical appearance, profession, family or marital status, nationality, race, sex, and all of the other things the world uses to define us - these are all of minor importance compared to the fact that we belong to God and have been born of God. This verse expresses these truths in a vivid way, when it asks us to consider the ways that God has lavished his love upon us, even when we do not always notice.

God's love also gives us confidence, by enabling us to know who we really are. The ways the world defines different persons usually create insecurity, tension, resentment, or competition. The way that God defines who we are relieves our insecurity and helps us rise above whatever criticisms the world may have of us. We need no longer respond to the world's demeaning attitude towards us, because we realize that they simply don't know who we are. And we cannot expect them to know who we are, because the perspective of the worldly makes it impossible for them to appreciate our ministries, our values, or our priorities. Let it be enough for own security to know that "the Lord knows those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19, Numbers 16:5), even if the world ignores us or hates us. And let us not despise them for not appreciating who we are, but rather let us pray and strive for the time when more of them also will choose to leave the darkness and walk in the light.

Our new identity also gives us hope (verse 2):

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

Every person who becomes a Christian begins to see his or her life and character change and take on a nature that reflects Jesus Christ. Although we are limited in this world by our fleshly natures, so that none of us ever reflects Jesus in more than small ways, even these small reflections of Jesus still shine brightly in a world full of darkness. The apostle is saying here that we have the hope of one day being made even more fully like him. We cannot be sure what exactly this means! Nor does the apostle invite us to speculate on the matter, since he specifically says that we do not know "what we will be." But he asks us to realize that, by definition, to be like God is something to await with eagerness and joy.

This hope should have a practical effect on us (verse 3):

Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

If we understand this hope (the hope of becoming more like God), then it will motivate us to be pure, because we understand that purity is one of God's most positive and attractive qualities. Purity is a quality that can only be appreciated by experiencing it. Our fleshly body will never itself desire purity, because the flesh must of necessity make sacrifices for us to become more pure. But when we can overcome temptations and make ourselves more pure, even in small ways, then we are able to see the ways that purity benefits our spirits and souls. This gives us the deeper hope of someday being with God, and seeing him in all his own purity, and it also gives us new reasons to continue our efforts to overcome the often impure desires that we have in our earthly selves.

The ideas that the apostle brings up in these three verses have important implications. He is urging us, in a slightly different way than Paul did, to "regard no one from a worldly point of view" (2 Corinthians 5:16). This begins with the way that we see ourselves: appreciating our identity as children of God can affect our view of ourselves in profound ways. The more that we understand the implications of this spiritual identity, the more that we can detach ourselves from all of the things that otherwise undermine a person's ability to be content with who he or she is. Knowing that we are children of God gives us a defense against insecurity, anxiety, insults, isolation, and many of the other problems that plague us so much. Further, when we can see those around us also as either children of God, or as temporarily lost souls with the potential to become children of God, this changes our perspective on them as well. It helps us to see our brothers and sisters in Christ as spiritual beings living in an earthly tent, just as we are. And it helps us to look past the folly and evil in the lives of unbelievers, to see the soul within them that longs to become a child of God.

Study Suggestion: Compare 1 John 3:1-3 with 2 Corinthians 5:16-17. Each of them urges us to see ourselves and others from a godly viewpoint, but the two writers approach this in different ways. Take a look at each passage in its context, and answer: (i) What reasons are given for making this change in perspective? (ii) How does each writer hope that his readers will change as a result? (iii) What implications do each of these have in our own lives?

No One Who Lives in Him Keeps On Sinning (1 John 3:4-6)

These verses are often misunderstood, and sometimes trouble Christians as they struggle against sin in their lives. As we study John's numerous statements to the effect that, "no one who lives

in him keeps on sinning", we shall take care to discuss them in light of John's goals in this epistle. He is by no means calling us to catalog all of the sins in our lives as an evaluation of whether we are in Christ or not. He is, instead, explaining an important implication of our identity as God's children.

John first clarifies the nature of sin (verse 4):

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.

There is no way to sin without becoming, in God's eyes, a lawbreaker. Lawlessness is an inherent and undeniable feature of sin. Whatever else the apostle tells us, whatever assurances he can give us about grace, none of this changes the dirty, unpleasant nature of sin. Sin is a powerful force that pulls us away from God. Fortunately, there are even stronger forces that pull us back to him.

Indeed, God's entire plan for his world hinged on providing forgiveness (verse 5):

But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.

Whatever else Jesus did in his earthly life was secondary to his sacrificial ministry of grace, his blood offering of himself that brought forgiveness and remission. Sin and forgiveness are the most central and vital issues involved in our relationship with God. Stop for a moment and think what the average human would consider to be the top priorities for God if he came to earth himself, as happened through Jesus Christ. The fleshly mind considers many issues to be more urgent and more important than sin and forgiveness, but to God this is the center around which everything else revolves. Forgiving our sins is the cornerstone on which all else in our relationship with God depends. Further, providing permanent grace and forgiveness could only be done by Jesus, God's son. Because only of Jesus could it be said, by the apostle or anyone else, "in him is no sin".

This then has an important implication for the Christian (verse 6):

No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

Throughout the epistle, John states emphatically, and almost repetitively, that when anyone sees God or knows God or lives in God, that person does not "continue to sin". In saying this, John is first of all discrediting those false teachers who were preaching that Christians could indulge their bodily desires because the flesh was of no importance to God. Those who believe such folly - either then or now - have no relationship with God, and indeed have never even seen him.

But John also is making a point important to genuine Christians, about the effects of knowing God. There is a link between relationship and lifestyle, and between belief and lifestyle, that cannot be severed. This is but one of many examples of 1 John's overriding principle that Christianity is an integrated whole. We cannot separate our beliefs from our actions, any more than we can love God and hate our brothers. Note that John's expressions, "continues to sin" and "keeps on sinning", are deliberately chosen to clarify that what he is talking about is a continuing disregard for what God says is right and wrong. John has made clear earlier in the letter that God has already provided for grace when we do sin. Note also that, while many persons indulge in fruitless analysis as to precisely what it means to "continue to sin" or to "sin continually",

there are no arbitrary "cutoffs" or foolproof criteria. We simply cannot approach the sin question from a legal (crime and punishment) viewpoint and still expect then to draw closer to God. John is instead giving us an entirely new motivation for avoiding sin, and he wants us to set aside questions of how much we can get away with, and think instead about how our hope in God's love can transform our lives.

John is also offering a form of re-assurance to those sincere Christians who struggle every day against their flesh, and who can easily be confused by the rampant sin around them that apparently goes unpunished. John assures us that it is worthwhile to resist worldly temptations, because in so doing we are nourishing our souls and strengthening our relationship with God, which is of greater value than anything offered by this world.

Study Suggestion: Consider, as honestly as it possible, the sins that you know are in your life. For each one, reflect on how a better understanding of God could help you to fight against it. That is, think about how a better awareness of God could help you to see the fruitlessness of these sins, could give you resources to resist the temptations, or could guide you into a better way of handling the situations that produced them. Consider points both here in 1 John and in other Scriptures that you can think of.

Whose Children? (1 John 3:7-10)

John now emphasizes the difference between those who are children of God and those who are not. He makes it clear that there are only two possibilities! This passage is almost repetitive in driving home the distinction between those who live in sin and those who do not, because it is so important for us to think about who we are as God's children in a sinful world.

John first speaks of those who do what is right (verse 7):

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

In saying this, John is again re-assuring his readers that, if they have accepted the basic truths of Christianity and are living them to the best of their ability, then they do belong to God, and God considers them righteous. He is essentially summarizing what he said at much greater length in chapter two. "Does what is right" includes all of the essentials that the apostle discussed then.

This then is contrasted with those who willfully live in sin (verse 8):

He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

It is the devil's very nature to sin, to hate, and to lie. Therefore those humans who do such things belong to the devil. The devil is the spiritual father of those who live as he does, just as God is the spiritual father of those who want to be more like him. It is important to note that John is not so much attempting to establish checklist criteria in order to determine to whom anyone belongs, as he is calling us to see how our spiritual identity and relationships are closely connected with the way that we live our lives, and vice versa.

John also knows, from observation and from his own experience, how discouraging it is to see the works of the devil and his children. He thus also assures us that Jesus came to destroy the devil's work. The offer of grace to all through the blood of Christ first of all contradicts the

devil's many ways of telling humanity that God does not care. The blood of Christ also gives to believers a permanent escape from a lifestyle dominated by despair, sinful desire, temptation, self-centeredness, and hopelessness - Jesus thus destroys the devil's most potent weapons.

John then returns to a previous point for emphasis (verse 9):

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.

John goes out of his way not only to re-emphasize the point, but also to set it in its spiritual context. The best reasons for Christians to avoid sin come from who we are, from who God is, and from the relationship we have with him. The apostle is repeatedly calling us to see sin as a matter of light or darkness, relationship or separation. This kind of perspective on sin will, in the long run, help us much more than it does to conceive of sin as a matter of legal guilt and punishment.

John then summarizes some of these points and also introduces his next topic (verse 10):

This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.

Note that the writer is discussing the children and their fathers in terms of their relationship first, not what they do first. That is, the children act the way they do because of their relationship with their spiritual father, not the other way around. Our relationship with God leads us to want to live as he asks us to - we do not earn a relationship with God because we do good things. The ungodly sin because they are the devil's children - the devil does not select them because they are ungodly.

This verse also introduces the next topic, that of love. Many of John's teachings about love, which we shall study next time, will closely resemble some of the things he has said in this week's verses.

Study Suggestion: Try to look at yourself objectively to see things that God has done in you - ways you have changed since becoming a Christian, spiritual lessons you have learned, ministries you have participated in, and the like. Consider where these blessings came from, in light of what we have read in 1 John 3 so far. These can all remind us that we are God's children, and are becoming more like our spiritual father. See also what other Bible passages you can find that discuss this or closely related topics.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2001

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WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

Notes For Lesson Seven: Love In Theory & In Practice (1 John 3:11-24)

We saw John introduce this topic at the end of last week's study. Having discussed our identity as children of God, he now wants us to think about one of the most important implications of this identity - the need for us to love, not just in theory but also in practice.

Love or Hate (1 John 3:11-15)

John begins by discussing love and hate thematically, in terms of where they come from and what they imply about our relationship with God. Before he discusses the practical implications of these teachings, he wants us first to stop and consider these more "theoretical" aspects of love and hate. As he does so often in 1 John, the apostle presents these opposites as each being part of a whole. Love is part of a healthy and complete relationship with God, while hate is a natural result of belonging to the evil one.

John tells us that we essentially have a choice whether to love or hate (verses 11-12):

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.

As he did earlier (2:7), the apostle reminds us that the command to love has always been part of any relationship with God. Love is such an integral part of God's own character that those who follow him, in any era, must themselves learn to love. Those who love belong to God, but those who hate belong to the evil one. Cain is a perfect example of this latter choice, a bad example but also an instructive one. In his resentment that God approved of Abel's offerings but not accept his own (Genesis 4:1-7), Cain chose the easy path of hating Abel rather than the more difficult path of changing himself. Of course, in this example, Cain did not even have a real reason to hate Abel, whereas many instances of hatred come from a genuine offense. But in both cases, there is still a choice. We have to realize that hating is always the easy way for our flesh, and never leads to anything good for our hearts or souls. No matter how good of an excuse that we may think we have to hate, we must realize that hating can only cultivate a relationship with the devil, who is the source and the foundation of all hatred.

There is also another important reality of which the apostle alerts us (verse 13):

Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.

Love is not a magic trick - if we love others, this does not automatically ensure that they will love us back. We must be aware that there will be many who hate or mistreat us, regardless of how we act. Consider how Jesus himself, who loved with perfect love, was treated by the persons he came to serve and save. As John said earlier (3:1), since the world does not know or understand or love God, it will never know or understand or love those who live for God. Jesus also repeatedly warned his disciples about the ways that the world will resist and oppose those who give their lives to God. We cannot change this or prevent it, even with love itself. But we

can be aware of it, so that we are not confused when it happens, and so that we do not question God or our faith in him.

John presents love and hate as a question of spiritual life or spiritual death (verses 14-15):

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

Love is an inherent part of the rebirth that Christians experience through the blood of Christ. In dying to the world, in being reborn and resurrected into a new life, we also die to the chains of hate that bind those in the world. Those who still live in and for this world, who do not have the Spirit, who have not experienced cleansing through grace and the blood of Christ, cannot avoid hating those who hurt them, because they are still in death. John deliberately uses exaggerated language to describe them ("murderer", as Jesus also implicitly called those who hate in Matthew 5:21-22), in order to emphasize the importance of rejecting hate as an option for those who walk in the light.

Study Suggestion: Apply what John is saying to your own attitudes and perspectives towards other persons, as honestly as possible. Recall also 1 John 2:7-11 and its teachings about light and darkness. There are a great many factors that can cause us to hate or envy or dislike other persons, and from a human viewpoint many of them are entirely logical. But John is warning us that what may be justifiable from a human viewpoint can still endanger our souls. It is well worth the trouble for us to try to examine and purify our attitudes towards others.

Love in Practice (1 John 3:16-20)

These verses are simple and straightforward, but also powerful and convicting. As important as it is to understand the source of love, it is equally vital to put it into practice. In these few short statements, John discusses the need to practice love and also describes the fruits of love, both in our lives and others' lives. Using the example of Christ, he shows how love ought to pervade the entire life of a Christian. Practicing love both reflects and nourishes a healthy relationship with God.

The apostle uses Jesus to define for us what love is (verse 16):

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

Jesus is the perfect example of practical love. He loved us emotionally, in his heart and mind, and also showed it with his actions. And his self-sacrifice on the cross was not just an empty gesture for the sake of dramatic effect, but rather was a very practical sacrifice that met important - indeed our most important - needs. He knew our need for forgiveness, and realized that no other way would give us the unlimited and continual cleansing that we needed. We shall not ever have to meet needs this deep in the lives of those around us, and in a literal sense most of us will never have to "lay down our lives" for someone. But John is calling us first of all to have the same kind of awareness of the needs around us, and then to have Jesus' willingness to meet those needs.

Only if we love with actions can we claim to love in truth (verses 17-18):

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

This is an easy verse to interpret, but a difficult one to practice. John's call not to love only "with words or tongue" is convicting to anyone who is honest with himself or herself. Genuine love is a challenging ideal that only Jesus will ever really reach, but all the same it is important for us to strive to be more like him in this regard. It is also important to keep in mind the example of Jesus in noticing and meeting needs. John's teaching is not meant to apply to material needs alone, although it is an important start for us to be more sacrificial with our money and other physical resources. We also should learn to take note of less tangible needs around us - especially in our contemporary American society, in which so many persons have an abundance of material wealth (at least by the standards of the rest of the world) but have such emptiness in their souls and spirits. Some have a need for teaching, some for encouragement or understanding, and some simply need someone to tell them the truth about themselves, even if at first it is not welcomed. Remember that, while Jesus did meet many physical needs, the most important aspects of his ministry centered on meeting spiritual needs.

Study Suggestion: Consider carefully what kinds of needs there may be around you, and in what ways you can thus apply John's teaching in verses 17-18. While actual material needs are important (as John stresses), think also of the non-material needs in others' lives that you might be able to meet, and consider practical ways that you could meet them.

John now tells us that this can "set our hearts at rest" (verses 19-20):

This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

John holds out a hope that we Christians greatly desire, that we might "know that we belong to the truth". And all of us probably know the feeling of having "our hearts condemn us". Anyone who tries to live as God calls us to will frequently make mistakes of judgment, or will stumble from the weakness of the flesh, and these things in turn make us question in our hearts and minds where we really stand with God, whether he has really forgiven us, and where our souls might go should we suddenly be called to judgment. Most Christians deal at least occasionally with self-condemnation, and for many it is a constant struggle.

It is important to note that John is not telling us that we set our hearts at rest solely by performing outward actions. A great many persons attempt to do this, but such a course of action is doomed to failure, both because it is not possible for a person to act in perfect love for any length of time, and because action alone can never change what is in our hearts, or satisfy the longing in our souls. What John is saying is different, and more comprehensive. He is talking, as he usually is in this letter, about a change of perspective. He is talking about accepting without reservation or objection the life of love to which we have been called, and irrevocably giving up our "right" to hate, to envy, and to resent other persons. This is indeed only possible if we belong to the truth, and it does set our hearts at rest when we make this commitment. As long as we allow ourselves room for error (since even the most loving human still has moments of weakness) our consciences can be clear in the knowledge that we are doing our best to live as Jesus did. John already said in 2:1-2 that he is presenting an ideal, but that any mistakes from sheer weakness have already been seen to by God.

And, as John says, God is greater than our hearts - that is, not only does he know everything in our hearts, so that he can never be fooled by outward actions that mask inward hatred and/or that are not accompanied by real love, he is also "greater than our hearts" in that his capacity for grace and love far exceeds the power of our own hearts and minds to condemn or torment ourselves. Our flesh and our conscience have the ability to tell us we are sinful failures, but God's more powerful grace can sweep away these accusations. We cannot look to our own hearts and minds, or to our own standards of behavior, for lasting peace and hope. We must instead look to God and accept unconditionally his call to us. If we do, we shall find that his grace and love are able overpower our own insecurities, inadequacies, and anxieties.

Confidence Before God (1 John 3:21-24)

As he does so often, John now re-emphasizes how all of his points tie together. Living a life of love is part of a Christian's overall fellowship with God, a fellowship that gives us confidence and hope. In these verses, John once more connects several of the important basics of Christianity - belief, love, and obedience - with the spiritual fruits that Christians experience in their lives.

He continues with his thought of being freed from self-condemnation (verses 21-22):

Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.

What John is saying is most suggestive. For a great many of us, the toughest obstacle that stands in the way of having confidence before God is our own self-condemnation. John says that, if we can remove this obstacle - that is, through accepting God's definition of love and his call for us to live by it - this will give us a much greater confidence before God. Not only so, it will have a great practical benefit in our communication with him and in our prayers to him. Setting our hearts at rest clears away a great impediment when we pray to God, both when asking him for something and when simply expressing our feelings and thoughts to him.

Make sure to note a couple of important points. First, John is not saying that this some kind of magical way to make sure that we can always get what we want. Despite the apparent literal meaning of the words, no human ever gets "anything we ask" of God in any literal sense, because even the most spiritual soul still asks for things that are inappropriate, or are not spiritually beneficial, or that God does want to give us, but not yet. What John is saying is something different, and something that, if looked at from a godly perspective, is even better. He is saying that those who clear their consciences through a life of love, and who thus live a life of obedience pleasing to God, will see the fruits of this in their personal interactions with God. They will find it much easier to ask God for blessings, will make it easier for God to grant those blessings, and will be quicker to understand when God does need to act differently than they asked him to.

A second point is that, when John says "we obey his commands and do what pleases him", he is not making a rule, but describing a relationship. That is, he is not saying that if we want our prayers answered, we have to obey first. Rather, he is describing a relationship with God based on love, on understanding, and therefore on perfect obedience, and he is saying that this then leads to good fruit in our prayers and other aspects of our relationship with God. It is because

we misunderstand this, and think that the blessings God gives us are somehow contingent on what we do for him, that we then misunderstand many of the other principles John is teaching in this epistle.

Study Suggestion: See how many other verses in the Bible you can find that present teachings about asking and receiving in prayer . Compare them with what John is saying here, and consider how they may help you to grow in your own prayer life.

John also clarifies what God means by "his commands" (verse 23):

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

Once more, John tells us that belief, love, and obedience, as God sees them, are inherently linked. And once more John clarifies that by "obedience" he does not mean a lifeless adherence to a list of regulations, but a life of willing submission to God based on a belief in the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and on an appreciation of the fellowship with God that this gives us. John repeatedly emphasizes the link between these things because he knows how difficult it is for us to view concepts such as obedience in the way that God wants us to conceive of them.

John also connects these concepts with his recurring "in" idea (verse 24):

Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Besides the other fruits he has detailed, John tells us that the obedient can be confident that they live in God, and that he lives in them. He ties this in with a new topic, the Spirit. In the later part of the epistle, John will more thoroughly discuss the Spirit of God and the "spirit" within each person.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2001

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**WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE:
THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN**

Notes For Lesson Eight: "Test the Spirits" (1 John 4:1-6)

The first part of this week's class will be used for review and for conclusion of last week's study. Then, our new topic will be John's call for us to "test the spirits" at the beginning of chapter 4. We shall only look at a few new verses this week, in order to allow for time to review some of the many important ideas from recent studies.

We shall begin this week's class by concluding the portion of last week's lesson that we left unfinished. See last week's handouts for an outline of the topics and the accompanying notes.

Do Not Believe Every Spirit (1 John 4:1-3)

As he must do throughout his letter, the apostle here injects a note of reality. It is just not possible for a Christian to be universally trusting and loyal to anyone who claims to speak on God's behalf. The only way to avoid a lifetime of confusion and of unstable beliefs is to learn to "test the Spirits". That is, we must develop a spiritual awareness that enables us to distinguish between the truth and the numerous man-made imitations of the truth.

John tells us plainly that we cannot believe everyone (verse 1):

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

In this verse, John's references to "spirits" refer simply to individual persons who claim, whether truthfully or untruthfully, to be speaking in the name of God. It is fairly obvious from the context that this is what John means, and this was also the unanimous understanding of early Christian commentators. John deliberately uses this unusual way of referring to human teachers in order to focus our attention on the nature and source of their teachings. Behind every human teaching, whether true or false, whether from God or from Satan, is a spiritual impetus. Christians speak the truth because God revealed it to them, told them to speak it, and through the Holy Spirit enabled them to do so. Unbelievers teach lies because the devil, who is the father of lies and also their spiritual father, has put these falsehoods in their minds, and encouraged them to promote these lies.

And John warns us that there are many of these false "spirits", who have gone out into the world and are teaching their lies to a gullible audience, an audience eager to hear these false teachings that will "tickle their ears". Therefore, we simply cannot be blindly accepting of every teaching we hear, even if it accords with our own desires and preconceptions. We have to test these "spirits" by comparing their message with the truth of the gospel.

There is, fortunately, a way to recognize the Spirit of God (verse 2):

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

John is not saying, of course, that the only thing necessary to prove that a teacher is from God is for that person to say verbally that Jesus has come in the flesh. It is necessary both to believe this as an actual, historical truth, and also to believe in it as a spiritual truth with practical implications. The apostle tells us that those teachers who do not want to admit the full truth

about Jesus, as well as those who may claim to believe the truth but prove otherwise by their lives, are not from God. But those who believe that God's Son took human form, walked the earth, and died for our sins, and who have then accepted his call to walk in the light, are from God and are in God.

Study Suggestion: Try to describe what you think John means when he says that anyone who "acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" is from God. He means much more than a verbal announcement, of course, but what might this description include? Find other Scriptures that help us to understand what he is saying, and then consider how we are meant to use this criterion in a practical sense.

John once again uses the strong term "antichrist" to describe false teachers (verse 3):

but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

We have already discussed the meaning and significance behind John's use of the term "antichrist", or "anti-anointed". (See "Notes For Lesson Five" for a more complete discussion.) Here, he once again reminds us of the true nature of the false teachers who plague the church in any age, and he also cautions us that these "antichrists" are not merely a threat in the distant future, but are indeed a present reality to be reckoned with. The real, spiritual danger that these genuine antichrists pose, in their ability to lure others away from God through insidious false teachings, is much more serious than the physical danger that would come from a mythical, cartoonish super-villain "antichrist" trying to bring physical destruction to the world.

From God or From the World (1 John 4:4-6)

Just as John wants us to be able to recognize false spirits, he also wants us to be forewarned of how they will act. From God's perspective, there is a sharp distinction between those who speak the truth in his behalf, and those who tell lies because they do not belong to God. From our human perspective, there are times when it can be very difficult to tell the difference, and the apostle thus wants to help us to improve our spiritual vision. He also gives us re-assurance by reminding us that there is nothing wrong with us just because the world does not listen to the message of the gospel. They are simply being consistent with their perspective, just as we are with ours.

We should first of all remember that we have overcome these worldly influences (verse 4):

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

The victory over these false teachers, and the lying spirits behind them, has already been won by Jesus Christ. Their power will always be limited, while God's power will always be unlimited. Those who leave the darkness and are walking in the light, who are in God and who have God living in them, have a Spirit who guides them into all truth, despite all the distractions and lies of the world. We do not have to fight against falsehoods on our own, we simply have to remain in God and continue in the truth he has revealed to us.

And we should not be disheartened or confused when the world does not listen to us, since they are only being true to their nature and to their spiritual father (verse 5):

They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.

What John is saying is basic, but most important. Those who live in and for this world have a set of priorities fundamentally different from the values and ideals held by Christians. "What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight" (Luke 16:15). It should be no surprise that unbelievers give attention, respect, and praise to those who proclaim and promote worldly values. They will naturally give their attention to those who promise them the things that the world values. We should not make the mistake of competing with them on their own terms! The gospel of Christ fulfills needs that many pagans do not even know that they have, needs much deeper than their foolish worldly cravings and boasting. But because of our own insecurities, Christians all too often try to attract attention to the gospel by revising it, by diluting it, so that it seems to meet the kinds of trivial, fleshly goals that interest unbelievers. Instead of this, we ought to teach the full truth of the gospel, because those who do want a relationship with God will listen to the truth when they have an opportunity to hear it. Let us never, in a misguided attempt to make the gospel less objectionable to those who have no real interest in God anyway, deprive the true seekers of their chance to hear the whole truth.

Study Suggestion: What all does John mean by "speak from the viewpoint of the world"? That is, consider everything included in that concept - the values, the perspective, the beliefs, &c. See what other Bible verses you can find that discuss this general idea. Then compare the "viewpoint of the world" with God's perspective, again using any Scriptures you can think of, to study about ways that we can clear our minds of the world's perspectives so that we can think about everything more from God's viewpoint.

Those who know God listen to God, not to the world's heroes (verse 6):

We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

The link between knowing and listening is another of the many links that John establishes in showing us how everything in our relationship with God fits together.. Just as those who are from the world will prefer to listen to other worldly voices, so too those who know God will listen to voices that speak truthfully, from God and about God. Any person who truly has fellowship with God will always prefer to listen to or read the truth that comes from God rather than the many voices speaking from the world, even though the latter may be louder or may be more appealing or exciting to the flesh.

This verse also suggests a reason to be secure in our identity as God's children. We know that many in the world will ignore or even ridicule what we say, but we also know that the other children of our Father will accept us as we are. We know that our fellowship with God gives us fellowship with his other sons and daughters. We recognize others who have the Spirit of God by their godly perspective on their lives and on the world, by seeing that they are walking in the light as we are.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 2001

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WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

Notes For Lesson Nine: God's Love & Ours (1 John 4:7-21)

This week's passage contains some of the best-remembered verses from 1 John. In this section, the apostle details the inseparable link between God's love for us and our love for one another. He continually ties these back in with his running theme of "God in us and us in God".

Love Comes From God (1 John 4:8-12)

The apostle stresses that God is the source of all love. In fact, "God is love". There are a great many practical implications to this: love is defined by God, love is made possible by God, love is exemplified by God, and love must characterize anyone who wants to know God. Our class presentation will merely introduce these ideas, which all would make good topics for home study.

Verses 7-8 contain one of the best-known quotes from the epistle, concerning God and love:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Notice how much the apostle ties together in these verses. God's love (for us) and our love (for each other) are again linked. He also connects the experience of being born of God to the practice of living in love. Further, he tells us that knowing God will lead to loving others. Love is such an integral part of God's character that anyone who knows him at all will automatically be influenced by it. The converse is that anyone who thinks of God only in terms of commands or rules has never really known God at all. To apply properly what John is saying, we of course need to have a better and more godly idea of what love means. As the apostle has taught us in the previous chapter, God's concept of love is more pervasive than most human perceptions.

John thus gives us another reminder of what love means to God (verses 9-10):

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

There are two essentials about love taught here, one familiar and one new. First, John reminds us of the way that Jesus Christ revealed God's perfect love through his life, teachings, and sacrificial ministry. Jesus' own love for humanity was perfect, and through Jesus we also see the love of God the Father, who freely gave his only Son as a gift to a sinful and desperate world. But John also wants us to see that love must always be defined by God. We cannot ever achieve or experience perfect love simply by observing and emulating Jesus at a distance, but only through personal fellowship with God. Genuine love never originates in the hearts or minds of humans, but only in God. God's love is never defined by any human standards, but by God's character, nature, and will. The practical implication of this is that, when we understand our need to love others more deeply, we ought not to try desperately to summon forth emotional feelings that we do not have, but rather should strive better to understand God and his feelings towards us.

Study Suggestion: Continue with these thoughts to study how you can learn to love other persons more. Consider what John is saying here, and see what other Scriptures you can find that describe God as the source of love and/or as the perfect example of love. Use these to give you direction in deepening your understanding of how much God loves us. In turn, look for practical ways that you can use these ideas to grow in your love for other persons.

To make sure that we understand, John explicitly calls us to follow God's example (verses 11-12):

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Two very important points appear here: God's love motivates us, and God's love is made complete in us. The more we understand God's love for us, the more that we cut through our own self-condemnation to see how eager God is to know us and to overlook our faults, the more that we then can grow in our love for others. Seeing God's love displayed so unconditionally towards us helps to clear away many of the obstacles (guilt, selfishness, and many more) that keep us from loving others by keeping us focused on ourselves. John also tells us that, when we strive to love one another, we have the capacity to experience God's love being made complete among us. As we grow in our love for God, we grow in our love for others. As we grow in our love for others, this in turn helps us to see and experience God's love in even greater ways.

Love, the Spirit, & Security (1 John 4:13-16)

As John had mentioned earlier in chapter 3, living in love is an important part of developing confidence, security, and peace in our hearts. Here in these verses, he shows us how everything fits together: God's love, especially as shown in Jesus Christ, God's gift of the Spirit, our acceptance of the truth of the gospel, and our willingness to live in love. John continues to develop his picture of how everything in our fellowship with God is meant to fit together.

We have confidence from knowing that the Holy Spirit lives within us (verse 13):

We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

John places great weight on his constant reminders that we live "in" God and that God is "in" us. Yet he also knows that this concept, encouraging as it is when we grasp it, often seems vague and ethereal. He thus tries to give us numerous reasons to have confidence in it, and numerous ways of trying to understand it just a little better. This verse simply reminds us that God willingly gave us his Spirit to live within us. While this idea itself is hard to understand, it is at the same time a clear indication of God's desire to live "in" us and to have us live "in" him.

The apostle now links these ideas with somewhat more tangible events that could be seen and testified to (verses 14-15):

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

John has mentioned frequently in his epistle that it is not possible to know God without acknowledging Jesus, both as the divine Son of God and also as one who lived in our world in a physical, human body. Without accepting this, we can never have any idea what it means to live in God, and can never know God on any genuine level. But if we do realize and believe that the Father sent his Son, it helps us better to understand many other ideas as well. Jesus Christ is the link between the spiritual, eternal world of God the Father, which at present we cannot see and

can only dimly understand, and the physical, perishable world that we inhabit now, and which is our fleshly body's only frame of reference in determining reality. When we acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the Son of God come in the flesh - that is, when we genuinely acknowledge this, rather than merely assenting to it verbally - it opens the door to a new universe, where the values and priorities of the earthly world are exchanged for better and more lasting ones.

Among many other implications, it enables us to place our reliance on God's love (verse 16):

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

We see again the refrain of "God is love". John does not miss an opportunity to remind us that love is a defining quality of God, because he knows how hard it is for us to remember that. We must constantly remind ourselves of the ways that God has shown his love by creating us, anticipating our spiritual needs, sending his Son to redeem us, and by constantly forgiving our mistakes and teaching us the things we most need to know. God also meets many of our fleshly needs, but since that is not his ultimate goal, he often acts in ways that we do not understand or appreciate, causing us to forget how much he does love us. John wants us to live in love so that we can have a constant reminder of the love God has for us, and of the importance that love has to God. Living in love is a good way to get a better sense of what it means to live in God.

Study Suggestion: Being aware of the love that God has for us is a crucial part of knowing and following God. Try to recall the things John has pointed out in this epistle that demonstrate how much God loves us. Add also things we learn from other Scriptures. Study how we might be able to make these things more real in our minds - and make sure to include John's direction in this chapter about living in love.

Some Important Implications (1 John 4:17-21)

Love is a very powerful concept. This is especially true when we understand how God defines love, as opposed to the hollow ways that the word is often used by humans. There are a great many implications and applications of the ideas about love that John has discussed. In 1 John 4:17-21, the apostle details just a couple of these that are closely related to his main themes and concerns.

One of the apostle's objectives is to give Christians confidence in their relationship with God, and so here he points out a link between love and confidence (verses 17-18):

In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

Who would not want to have confidence on the day of judgment! And yet very few Christians have the right kind of confidence. Note carefully how John says we can have this confidence through love: "because in this world we are like him". He is not by any means suggesting that we can earn self-confidence through our love for others. Rather, by living in love we are able to see God's own love made complete, and thus gain confidence and security from knowing how great his love is for us. Compare what John is saying here with his teachings in the previous chapter about setting our hearts at rest. Remember also what he said above, "this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us ... ". We cannot summon forth a perfect love from ourselves alone. Only through God can we know and practice genuine love. One very important aspect of this is that to make God's love complete requires more than just one's own individual commitment to the ideal. We must work together and help one another if we wish to see God's

love made complete among us. John also promises us that perfect love drives out fear. One of the features of most of the emotions and perspectives that humans erroneously call "love" is that they very often bring insecurity and anxiety, rather than peace and confidence. But in what God calls love, there is no fear, because the more that we become aware of his love, the more that this awareness will drive out fear from our hearts.

John now reminds us once more of why we ought to love others (verses 19-21)

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Besides reminding us of the basic point that God's love for us ought to produce in us love for others, the apostle also explains a practical reason why we should learn to live in love, and why it has to be a lie if we claim to love God but hate those around us. He tells us that without loving those other persons who are living alongside us, we cannot love God, whose true form we are not yet ready to see. God loves humanity, to the point of making great sacrifices to bring them into fellowship with him, and to the degree that he is willing to forgive even the most depraved of our sins if we turn from them. Therefore anyone who knows God will soon come to realize how much he cares for the people he created - and conversely, anyone who learns to love humans in a genuine and selfless fashion will begin to see what God values so much and loves so much in them. We can learn, like God, to look past the sin and weakness, and in most persons we can still see the side of them that resembles their Creator (who made them in his image) waiting to shine through.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 2001

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WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

Notes For Lesson Ten: Overcoming the World (1 John 5:1-5)

The beginning of 1 John chapter 5 brings to a climax many of the ideas that the apostle has been discussing. All of the promises and re-assurances that John has mentioned find their ultimate fulfillment not in rewards in this physical world, but in our eternal fellowship with God. Christianity is not a means of surviving or thriving in this world, but of overcoming the world. To those believers who can accept this, what John tells us here constitutes one of the most uplifting passages in the Bible.

The last three lessons have emphasized some of the most important points in the epistle. In the last part of 1 John 3, the apostle tells us how living in God's love can set our hearts at rest, so that we are not plagued by self-condemnation and all that it entails. At the beginning of chapter four, John tells us something similar about our minds, when he exhorts us to "test the spirits", that is, to test everything we hear or read to determine whether the speaker has the viewpoint of the world or the viewpoint of God. If we learn to do this, we can set our minds at rest by living in God's truth, and can escape the cycle of confusion, deception, and frustration that otherwise comes to those who accept whatever anyone else says. Then, in the last part of the fourth chapter, John again ties together all of his major themes with the idea that "God is love". Now, at the beginning of 1 John 5, the epistle comes to a climax with John's promise that Christians can overcome the world.

Belief, Love, & Obedience (1 John 5:1-3)

John once more points out how these basic concepts of Christianity are meant to fit together. If we believe, we love, and if we love, we obey. If we love God, we love others, and if we love others, we love God. The apostle knows that our flesh sees these things either as independent of each other, or even as conflicting opposites. So he continues to take pains to re-iterate that, to those who live in God and walk in the light, they all go together.

Genuine belief in Jesus has some important effects on our lives (verse 1):

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.

Once again we see the apostle establishing and confirming connections between important themes in Christianity. Besides the link between belief and love, which we have seen before, he adds the link between belief and rebirth. This goes back to his earlier description of believers as "children of God", and also recalls Jesus' call to be born again from the gospel of John. Believing in the gospel of Christ is far from an intellectual exercise, and even goes beyond a lifestyle change. It is a genuine rebirth into an entirely new life. It is also a rebirth into a new family, and those who love the father must therefore love his children as well, since in God's family we are all brothers and sisters, created in the image of our Father.

Loving God's children has its own implications (verse 2):

This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands.

Just as we cannot love God without loving his children, we cannot love those around us unless we also love God. As always, John shows us that the two fit together. No one rightly can claim to love God without making a commitment to love others, and no one who claims to love others can do so genuinely unless he or she also has decided to love God. John also points out that these commitments of love include, as a necessary implication, the willingness to obey God's commands. Without this pledge, no one can claim truthfully to love God, and further, if we do truly love others, we will obey the commands that God has given us, since many of them teach us how to love.

Every mention of "obedience" displeases our flesh. Our earthly self cannot see the connection between love and obedience, and even worse, the flesh also thinks that obedience must always be painful. But John assures us otherwise (verse 3):

This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ...

Just as we must understand love the way that God defines it, rather than listening to the weird ideas that humans promote about "love", so also we must discard our fleshly ideas about obedience. God never asks for or desires a grudging, uncomprehending resignation to the necessity of doing what he commands. Nor does he ask for or desire a frightened, desperate effort to stave off punishment by trying to do as he wills. We get these distorted and unhealthy views about "obedience" from the ways that human authority figures misuse and abuse their power and influence, and such things should not be projected onto our view of God's nature. God wants our obedience to come from our desire to know him, and from the appreciation of his wisdom and of his love that we develop whenever we make even small efforts to live as he calls us to.

Even beyond this improved perspective on obeying God's commands, John wants us to realize something about the commands themselves. Once again, we must discard our warped fleshly feelings and views about "commands", and about how burdensome we feel them to be. Indeed, a great many of the commands made by human authorities are truly burdensome, and many do not even fill a constructive purpose, other than meeting the convenience or boosting the ego of the person that made them. But none of this is true at all of God's commands, which were made with our spiritual well-being in mind. The only reason we ever dislike any of God's commands is because many of them restrain our flesh - but this is often necessary in order to nurture our souls and spirits. If we learn better to appreciate God's wisdom, and to follow his laws without so much resistance, we learn that we can thus experience the great victory and blessing of ...

Overcoming the World (1 John 5:4-5)

This promise that we shall overcome the world is the climax to all of the things that John has been calling us to do. The many ways that we must fight our flesh in order to live as God calls us to do will find their reward in this, that we can emerge from our earthly trials victorious and

strong because of God. This is both a clarification and an exhortation. Only by realizing that the ultimate goal is overcoming the world, not succeeding in the world, can we learn to take heart in God's promises and to understand what he asks us to do.

John tells us that overcoming and rebirth go together (verse 4):

for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.

Becoming a Christian means many things, as we have been reminded throughout 1 John. Our spiritual rebirth means that we have come from death to life, and it allows us to experience victory over this decaying world. This victory he promises is not on worldly terms or fleshly terms! It does not mean a promise of money, or fame, or ease, or popularity, but something much greater than any of these things. The victory won by those born of God is a victory over the entire physical universe, with all its desires, all its boasting, and all its selfishness. Those who obey God's commands, and who do so even when their flesh screams for them to do otherwise, soon learn that there is something much better than a life oriented around the desires of this world. The freedom that comes with being released from worldly perspectives is a blessing beyond anything that God could give us in this world. The realization that we do not have to accept the world's standards, that we do not have to scratch and claw to grab the things that the world tells us we must have, that we do not have to live solely for whatever pitiful achievements and possessions we can collect in 60 or 80 years, this realization opens up a new and satisfying universe for our souls and for our spirits.

And it is our faith that is the victory. (Several other versions make this point with somewhat less ambiguity than does the NIV.) The victory is that we can - in spite of the world's pull and the weakness of our own flesh - have faith in the living God through Jesus Christ. Not only does faith give us victory over the world, but it is the only way to overcome the world (verse 5):

Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

A great many humans think that they can overcome the world in some other way. Many think that by accumulating enough wealth, they can free themselves from the constraints that limit everyone else. Others think that their innate talents and abilities should be enough to inspire the world to worship at their feet in admiration. A few persons have even gone so far as to attempt to conquer the world by force. All of these, and the many other bizarre ways that the flesh comes up with to try to defeat the world, are foredoomed. The world is too big for us, and the one who is in the world is too powerful for us. The only way we can overcome the world is not to conquer it or subdue it but to escape its clutches entirely, through finding a new home for our souls.

We all yearn to overcome the world. No one wants to spend their entire existence at the mercy of the many limitations and hazards that must affect any mortal being. But to try to fight this battle on human terms, as almost everyone does, is pathetic and foredoomed. No material possession, no human relationship, no achievement or accomplishment, can ever fulfill the spiritual longing within us. It is so sad to see humans racing around frantically for worldly rubbish that will soon crumble away, when spiritual riches await us all. There is a great victory waiting to happen in all of our lives. It is not what our flesh thinks of as a victory, but it is much

more lasting and satisfying than any victory we can win in this world, because we can, through faith in Jesus Christ, win a victory over this world.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 2001

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WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

Notes For Lesson Eleven: The Testimony About God's Son (1 John 5:6-12)

The first few verses of 1 John 5 brought to a climax John's exposition of important principles in our fellowship with God. In this next passage, John does not add new points to his picture of Christianity, but rather seeks now to emphasize the reliability and validity of what he has said. He therefore stresses the form of testimony that is available to remind us of the truth of the gospel.

Last week's study covered 1 John 5:1-5, which climaxed all of John's exhortations to walk in the light, promising that through faith in Jesus we can "overcome the world". For the remainder of the epistle, John will be primarily concerned with driving home the reliability and importance of what he has already said.

(Note: the usual "Study Suggestions", for those who are studying 1 John on their own, were inadvertently omitted from last week's notes. They are included at the end of this week's notes.)

Those Who Testify (1 John 5:6-9)

John reminds us that our beliefs about the gospel of Jesus Christ are not based primarily on the lives and beliefs of humans like John and the apostles. As reliable and encouraging as those eyewitnesses certainly are to us, there are even more reliable sources that demonstrate to us the truth of the gospel, and that emphasize its importance in our lives. Believers sometimes find John's references to "the Spirit, the water, and the blood" somewhat confusing or ambiguous, but they are easier to understand in the context of John's overall message and goals.

This testimony centers on Jesus Christ, the one who came (verse 6):

This is the one who came by water and blood--Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

The ancient Christians saw John's reference to Jesus coming "by water and blood" as a clear and unambiguous reference to Jesus' baptism and crucifixion.* Jesus "came" by these two events in that he most emphatically showed who he was through them. At his baptism, the Spirit visibly descended on him and God audibly proclaimed him to be his Son - two signs even more powerful than the miracles that Jesus himself performed, because the signs at his baptism came entirely and obviously from above. And on the cross, Jesus' made completely clear why he had come, making a sacrifice for sin only God's own Son could effectually offer.

* See the "Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture" volume that includes 1 John. (It is listed in the references given at the beginning of the Spring.) This is one of many examples when confusion about a verse can be cleared up with a good degree of confidence by seeing what the early Christians understood a verse to mean. Of course, their writings and ideas are not as reliable as the Bible itself, but when early commentators are in agreement with one another, it is more likely that the early church preserved the correct meaning of a Scripture for a short while than it is that 20th century commentators, with all of their own agendas, could find a correct meaning that eluded the early believers.

The Spirit also testifies to the truth, both through the written word and by living in each believer. As we have discussed, the Spirit is a vital link between us and God, and his presence assures us that it is possible for us to overcome the world, to resist the traps and temptations laid in our path, and to walk in the light as God has called us to do.

John emphasizes that these witnesses are in agreement (verses 7-8):

For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

John emphasizes the unanimity of these "witnesses" to the truth. God never contradicts himself, and his message is always the same. If we ever see an apparent inconsistency or contradiction in what God has said, it reveals only that we have not fully understood what God is saying. Beyond that, he also wants us to realize why each witness is significant to us. That is, he wants us to put confidence in what the Spirit, the water, and the blood tell us about God, rather than letting them remain theoretical principles of theology. John has now mentioned several times the importance of the Holy Spirit as a link between the divine God and his physical people. The Spirit's presence assures us of many things, not least that God is in us and we are in God. The water by which Jesus came - his baptism - is an assurance that he did come from God, and that he did speak from God. We did not see with our own eyes this emphatic sign of Jesus' divine origin, but others did. (Peter reminds us of the significance of a very similar event - the transfiguration - in 2 Peter 1:16-18.) Finally, we have the witness of the blood that Jesus shed on the cross, which testifies to the type of mission Jesus had. Although he came as God's Son, into a world he created, he did not come as a forceful conqueror or as an authoritarian leader, but as a lamb to the slaughter, a willing sacrifice for humanity's crimes. All of these witnesses remind us of the truth and its implications.

John urges us to remember that such divine testimony is far more important and far more reliable than the testimony and ideas of humans (verse 9):

We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.

There is a usefulness to human testimony. After all, we must to some degree accept the validity of those eyewitnesses to the basic facts about Jesus. And it can be encouraging to see examples, whether in the Bible or in contemporary experience, of the ways that God has acted in the lives of his people. But we must always remember that God's testimony is far greater, and whenever human experience or teaching conflicts with God's testimony, there is no question which we should believe. The apostle also reminds us that all of God's testimony ultimately concerns his Son, who was always the focus and goal of God's plans and commands long before Jesus walked the earth. This gives God's testimony an additional importance, and it also adds further implications to our decision whether to accept or reject it, as John will stress below.

Study Suggestion: How does the testimony of "the Spirit, the water, and the blood" strengthen our belief in the gospel of Jesus? What effectiveness should they have to all of us, and what aspects of their testimony are especially significant or helpful to you personally? Consider also the other forms of testimony that God has left us, and how they fit in with these three "witnesses" that John mentions here.

The Testimony in Our Hearts (1 John 5:10-12)

It is one thing to know the testimony, but another to accept it, to believe it, and to keep it in our hearts. Therefore John points out that these reliable witnesses to the gospel are not only an encouraging source of confidence in the truth. They are also a challenge, a call to live by the truths to which they attest. John exhorts us to accept the testimony, because only thus can we have life worthy of the term. As he has stressed throughout his epistle, there is only light and darkness, nothing in between. One either accepts God's astounding testimony about his Son, and lives by it, or one decides that God is a liar and that the gospel is not true after all. By the nature of the testimony, there is no other honest alternative.

Our decision about God's testimony has important implications (verse 10):

Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.

Those who respond to God's testimony with faith and acceptance live in God, and God lives in them, in their hearts. But the alternative is that, if we choose to dispute or reject God's testimony, we implicitly call God a liar. We cannot have God in our hearts if we think he is not telling us the truth about such important topics as salvation, life, and light. We therefore have a responsibility to listen to the testimony and determine whether we can accept it fully or not at all. Just as John has told us all along that we are either in the light or in the darkness, we must likewise accept and rely on the truth of the gospel, or reject it altogether. Any attempt to have it both ways by redefining Jesus, in a way that pleases our flesh while avoiding difficult truths, is dishonest, misguided, and will eventually be exposed by God for what it is.

John then reminds us about the testimony and its ultimate implication (verse 11):

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

The testimony of God is intended to teach us many things, but above all that we can have eternal life through Jesus Christ. Whatever other lessons, whatever other blessings, that we receive from God are only important when we keep this in mind. "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." (1 Corinthians 15:19) This is where the light leads, and if we walk in the light, it will be our own ultimate goal and wish.

There is Life in the Son of God, and only in the Son of God (verse 12):

He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

John once more emphasizes the contrast between the light and the darkness. Those who accept the Son have life now and forever. Jesus Christ gives meaning and purpose to all that we do, whether at the time it is pleasant or painful. The divine witnesses that the apostle has referenced convince us that this is true, that there is more to our lives here than trying to scratch by in this world, trying to get what we can while we can. But those who do not have the Son of God have no life worthy of the name. They are stumbling in the darkness of this sin-filled world, ruled by their flesh. They can never overcome the world unless they accept the gospel of truth. But we can overcome the world. Christianity, with its focus on grace and love, is not just a beautiful philosophical concept, it is the truth, attested to by witnesses that never ever say anything but the truth.

Study Suggestion: What all is implied in the "life" that the apostle promises here? How does it differ from the life that the flesh seeks? Why is Jesus necessary if we are to have this kind of life? Consider also John 10:10, and any other related verses you can think of. Then, as honestly as possible, compare your own expectations of Christianity with what John tells us that God actually promises, and use this study to clarify what our goals really ought to be in our fellowship with God.

Addendum to Last Week's Notes: Study Suggestions For Lesson Ten

Here are the study suggestions that were omitted from last week's notes:

Study Suggestion For 1 John 5:1-3 - John has now completed his presentation of what it means to "walk in the light", versus living in the darkness. To help you see the broader picture that John is presenting, make yourself a complete list or chart of all the things that John has told us are part of the light, and of all the things that John has told us are part of the darkness. When appropriate, use pairs of opposites. For example, the light includes God, love, and truth, whereas the darkness contains Satan, hate, and lies. Begin your study using 1 John alone, and after finding everything you can from 1 John, see what you can add from other books of the Bible.

Study Suggestion For 1 John 5:4-5 - What all is involved in "overcoming the world". That is, what are the things in this world that we want or need to overcome? What do we expect or hope to have in their place when we have overcome the world? How should our answers differ from the ways that unbelievers would answer these questions?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 2001*

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WE ARE IN HIM WHO IS TRUE: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

Notes For Lesson Twelve: Implications & Concluding Comments (1 John 5:13-21)

John concludes his epistle with reminders of some of the most important implications of what he has taught. Above all, he wants his readers to remember that they have eternal life in Jesus, that they are in God, and that God lives in them. Understanding these concepts enables us to think about ourselves and our lives in an entirely new way.

Confidence in Knowing God (1 John 5:13-15)

John's main goals in this epistle have been to give us a clearer idea of who we are, of where we are, and of what it means to have fellowship with God. Having explained all this, he now wants to remind us of the confidence that we can have before God when we are walking in the light. We can be sure both of our eternal home with God and of God's presence with us in this world.

John has just mentioned in verse 11 that we have eternal life in the Son, and he wants us to be sure of this hope (verse 13):

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

So many of the anxieties and frustrations that Christians experience can be traced from their lack of assurance about the future. As Paul told the Corinthians, to be a Christian simply in the hope of having a good life on earth is a ticket to misery. Christians should always remember that eternal life is the greatest of all the promises God has made. Note that, when John says that to have eternal life we must "believe in the name of the Son of God", this also reveals what he means by "believe". He is suggesting that those who truly believe in the Son of God will certainly understand why he came, and thus will be certain that eternal life is the greatest reward we get for following Jesus. The apostle also wants us to be certain that we can have eternal life. God does not want his children constantly worrying over whether some misstep has rendered them temporarily "unsaved". Once again, those who take the time to understand who Jesus was and to develop a genuine faith in him will be able to appreciate how strong this promise to us is.

There is one special blessing that we who believe receive in this world (verses 14-15):

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him.

We must wait until eternity to experience our transformation into a permanent body that will never perish, but we can enjoy the reality of God's presence in our lives now. The most direct way that we can feel and experience his presence is through prayer. John reminds us that those who believe in Jesus can freely and confidently approach God at any time. God wants us to approach him; we never need fear that we will displease him by asking him for something or by expressing our feelings to him. We simply must remember the criteria that John stresses here: we know that he hears and gives us what we ask for, as long as our request is according to his will. That does not necessarily mean that it must be something he already had decided to do - it means that he will grant those prayers that are consistent with his priorities and with his will for our lives. We need not calculate or speculate on what his will is; we need only be confident in

his presence and his love, and let him know honestly how we feel. He will grant us anything we ask for if it is indeed spiritually beneficial according to his will, and should we ask something that cannot be harmonized with his perfect will, he shall gently decline our request and do what he can to help us understand.

Study Suggestion: Find other verses in 1 John that assure us of eternal life and of God's presence when we approach him, and then consider other Scriptures that promise these same things. (If you have trouble getting started, try the gospel of John.) How confident are you that you have eternal life? How much does it help you to know that you have it? How confident are you that God listens to your prayers? Study how these Scriptures can help you to grow in your confidence in these areas.

Prayer For Those Who Sin (1 John 5:16-17)

Having just assured us of the confidence that we can have in approaching God in prayer, John now points out one important specific use of prayer, in which it is important to remember that God attentively listens to our prayers. Note that verse 16's reference to a "sin that leads to death", so often speculated upon, is in context merely an aside or a detail, not meant to be the main point of emphasis in the passage. It is unfortunate that the fleshly curiosity to determine an exact meaning to this mysterious phrase causes many persons to overlook the more important spiritual lesson John is teaching us about praying for others.

In asking us to pray for the brother who sins, John follows his point from the previous verses with a practical example (verse 16):

If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that.

John has just told us that, if we ask God anything according to his will, he hears us and gives us what we ask of him. This verse urges us to put that into practice in a particularly important way. Of course God wants a person who sins to repent and to be healed, and if we pray for this, God will do all that is appropriate in that person's life to convict the sinner of his error, and to heal him from the sin. In context, the point is that we ought to feel confident that God will hear that kind of prayer, since it is certainly in accordance with his will. When we see our brothers or sisters sin, we sometimes do everything but pray, and John is reminding us that prayer is not only the most spiritual response, it is also the one with the greatest chance of proving effective.

In context, John's reference to a "sin that leads to death" is simply a clarification that John realizes that there are times when it is not God's will to overlook a particular sin through prayer alone, if it is of such a nature as to destroy irrevocably one's relationship with God. He does not clarify what sin(s) he means, partly because it is not really his main point, but also because his readers probably knew what he meant. The phrase is found in several early Christian writings, and the earliest of them use it without explanation, as does John. Later Christian writers (3rd and 4th century AD)* clarify what the early church understood this to mean: it was most often interpreted, at least in that era, to refer to Christians (not unbelievers) who turned actively against the church and who either persecuted those who disagreed with them or caused bitter, large-scale divisions. (Remember that one of John's motivations in writing the epistle was to prevent or limit exactly this sort of thing.) There are also other possibilities**, but in any case the meaning of this phrase is secondary to John's main point about being confident that prayer for our brothers can heal them of sin.

* Still later (in the early Middle Ages) this verse began to be used to support the medieval Roman Catholic teaching about the distinction between "mortal sins" and "venial sins". This doctrine is not found in writings from the earliest centuries of Christianity.

** Many modern theories as to the meaning of the phrase are based more on speculation or human logic than on Scriptural or historical evidence. Note also that many readers confuse 1 John 5:16 with the references in the gospels to "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit", or what is commonly called the unforgivable sin. These are not necessarily the same thing - there are differences in context, audience, and application - and the early Christians usually (with some exceptions) understood that they referred to different things.

Even if one does not know exactly what this phrase means, the meaning of the verse is still the same: we ought to be active in praying for Christians who are struggling with sin, and if those Christians have not turned completely against God, they can be healed. Our prayers will help them!

John concludes his example with an exhortation (verse 17):

All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

While modern readers often place a misguided emphasis on the obscure phrase that we have discussed above, John's emphasis is on giving us confidence to pray for our brothers and sisters when we see them involved in sin. Since we are well aware that there are some sins - whatever we might understand them to be - that our prayers alone cannot help, John wants us to realize that those are the exceptions rather than the rule. (That is why it is so unfortunate that our attention is often so focused on what John meant to be a secondary point.) We can therefore pray for fellow believers in confidence that God wants to heal them.

Study Suggestion: How often do you pray for other brothers and sisters? Begin with 1 John and find as many Scriptures as you can that tell us to pray for each other. Look especially for any practical help that they offer. Then try to put these into practice - either by praying for those whom you are close to, or by using congregational prayer requests, or using some other convenient source of ideas.

Understanding From the Son of God (1 John 5:18-21)

John's epistle has been filled with complex, serious concepts. He concludes it with a broader exhortation to continue living in the truth that we have received through Jesus Christ. He wants us to come away from reading his letter with both a conviction of how important it is for us to walk in the light, and also a confidence that we can walk in the light as God desires.

He reminds us that we can be safe from the evil one (verses 18-19):

We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him. We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.

The apostle once again re-iterates that those born of God do not keep on sinning, and as usual this is meant to be an assurance, not a cause of insecurity. He wants us to realize that Jesus' protection of us is a reality, and that we really can rise above the sin in our lives. The evil one can tempt, but cannot force us to sin, and cannot pull us away from Jesus against our will. Jesus said that "no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28, 29). Many times the reason why Christians give in to sin is because they simply do not believe that it is possible to resist. And indeed, the devil is more powerful than we are. If we attempt to face him on our own power, he will crush us and humiliate us. John even tells us that the whole world is under his control, and

if we fight with the weapons of the world, we shall lose. But we can overcome through Jesus, and only through him.

John summarizes all that he is teaching in saying that "we are in Him who is true (verses 20-21):

We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true--even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

Jesus gives us understanding and wisdom as well as love and confidence. We can understand who we are, and we can know our God. We can know that Christianity is true, and we can live in the truth, and can even live in "him who is true". Christianity is the way to have life, security, purpose, joy, and confidence - and it is the only way to have these things in genuine form and lasting measure. John's concluding call to avoid idols makes more sense when we realize what he is doing: there is only one God worth worshipping, and in order truly to know him we must discard all of our idols, whether literal or figurative, tangible or intangible.

Throughout his epistle, John has convicted us that we are called to walk in the light, and he has re-assured us that it is possible for us to walk in the light with our God. The letter is meant to change us, but also to give us confidence and joy. If we have chosen to use our lives to walk in the light, to build fellowship with God and with his children, we have made the right decision.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 2001

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WALKING IN THE TRUTH: THE SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

Week One: In Truth & Love (2 John 1:1-3)

The two short epistles of 2 John and 3 John are worthy of attention if for no other reason than their personal focus. While the recipients of both letters are certainly faithful, devoted believers, they do not have the same prominence as missionaries like Timothy or Titus, or wealthy benefactors like Philemon. Yet to God, visible or charismatic or wealthy Christians are no more important than the 'average' believer whose life has obvious impact on only a few others.

In fact, it is because of the fleshly tendency to focus on large-scale actions directed by influential persons that many commentators will simply assume that the addressee of the letter, "the chosen lady" (1:1) must be a reference to the church as a whole, or at least to some entire congregation. Yet neither John nor any other New Testament writer ever used such an obscure way of referring to the church, and the tone of the epistle is highly personal.

In fact, both 2 John and 3 John were written to individuals (there is, of course, no ambiguity as to the recipient of 3 John), and they have been preserved for later generations of believers so that we can appreciate the personal advice they contain. The decisions that you and I make in our daily lives matter just as much to God as do decisions made by church leaders or powerful secular leaders. Indeed, in all these cases, God's interest in our activities is often for reasons much different from ours.

The ideas in the rest of the epistle all focus on knowing and loving the truth (1:2). God's truth is not subjective; it does not change from one era to another or from one culture to another. Nor is it tailored to our individual desires and preconceptions. Moreover, God's concern for truth does not center on factual knowledge for its own sake, but rather on our acceptance of the things that truly matter to God. If seeking God's truth depended on accumulating a certain amount of factual lore or doctrine, then Christianity would be inherently unfair to some and easier to others.

But God gives each person an equal chance to know his truth, because his truth is equally challenging to us all. The temporary nature of this earth, the perishable nature of our bodies, our sin and what it does to our relationship with God, our complete inability to save ourselves - these are not easy for anyone to accept. Thus we descend into analyzing and debating comparatively minor matters with one another, tacitly agreeing not to trouble one another with these uncomfortable realities.

Yet it is only through the truth that we can appreciate and fully experience God's grace and love (1:3). It is not possible to receive God's grace until we realize our need for it, and we shall not appreciate the spiritual blessings God has for us until we first realize that none of this world's rewards can last. Thus John phrases both his love and his hope for his friends, "the chosen lady" and her children, in terms of their mutual devotion to the truth.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2008
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WALKING IN THE TRUTH: THE SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

Week Two: Not A New Command (2 John 1:4-5)

As the apostle John writes to his friend, the "chosen lady", he notes their mutual faithfulness to God's truth. This is not merely a commitment to a list of facts or doctrines, but an acceptance of the full reality of our mortal nature, of our guilt for sin, and of our need for the blood of Christ. As the apostle continues, he mentions the joy that the truth can bring. And truth is not new, for God has always made clear the basic truths of this universe to those who care to see them.

John comments on the joy that it gives him to see others who live by the truth that comes from God (1:4). Whether he is referring to his friend's own biological children, or to others whom this faithful woman has brought to belief in Jesus, and regardless of the situation in which John has met them, the apostle values nothing so much as their continued faithfulness.

At this time of his life, John is one of the very last living links to the days when Jesus walked our earth in the flesh. No one knows better than John does the vast array of dangers and temptations that a believer in Jesus must face. Merely to come to Jesus, we have to get past our many weaknesses as well as an enormous variety of false teachings. To remain true to Jesus for a lifetime does not happen by accident, and John appreciates those who persevere.

We likewise should share in God's joy over those who continue to fend off the daily attacks of Satan and his worldly allies. Even when the fruits of a faithful life are not obvious to others, it nonetheless takes a continual humility and trust in God to maintain one's faithfulness in the face of such opposition. Each one of our brothers and sisters in Jesus has some thorn in the flesh, some painful burden. Every faithful believer needs to know that he or she has our support and appreciation.

John's comment that God's command to love is not new (1:5) reminds us of how essential to God this is. Even to describe this as a 'command' is probably misleading, because love is really a natural result of genuine faith. As the same apostle wrote earlier, "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:7b-8). Any form of 'faith' that does not result in greater love and compassion for others is not faith in God at all.

This is the sense in which we have had the 'command' to love from the beginning. Love is fundamental to God's perspective, and it is an essential value to all who truly believe in God and in Jesus. Even the worldly rarely dispute the importance of love - their problem is, rather, that without God they can never understand what genuine love means.

John calls us to walk in love the way that Jesus exemplified it. Jesus' love was sacrificial, and it was universal. As he pointed out, it is easy to love those who give to us and love us. The test of godly love is whether we truly love all others, without regard to their value in earthly terms.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2008

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WALKING IN THE TRUTH: THE SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

Week Three: Love & Obedience (2 John 1:6)

John's statement in verse 6 is often the source of confusion and misunderstanding. Yet this link between love and obedience is mentioned numerous other times in Scripture, and Jesus himself said much the same thing that John does here. We can learn to grasp what John is saying, and indeed the principle involved can be helpful in many aspects of our relationship with God.

One way to approach 2 John 1:6 is through the key words that John uses. 'Love', 'obedience', 'commands', and 'walk' are everyday terms, but it misleads us to analyze them using dictionary-style definitions. Like so many words used in Scripture, these are expressions by which God approximates, in human language, concepts that mortal beings cannot fully understand. To appreciate what a biblical author says, it helps to look past linguistic or semantic considerations.

Love is a term that is particularly misused and wrongly defined by the world. Even the familiar word analysis we meet in the church is only a little more helpful. In fact, many passages of Scripture are devoted to trying to understand what God means by love. The main point, made here in verse 6 and made in different contexts in various other Scriptures, is that genuine love expresses itself in effective ways, not in emotions or feelings.

We also tend to misunderstand what obedience means, because of the many insecure human authorities who prefer to be followed blindly than for others to think for themselves. Humans thus tend to see obedience in terms of submitting to arbitrary authority, rather than considering the value (or lack of value) of the action performed. God, though, wants for his children to understand their Father and to trust him, not simply to submit to him as an authority figure.

Commands, likewise, mean something different to God than they mean to us. God never makes an arbitrary command. There is good reason (whether the reason is spiritual, symbolic, practical, or something else) for everything that he calls us to do. Moreover, he already knows that we frequently will fail to do what he asks. If the act of submission was in itself what mattered to God, then he could have made both us and our world much differently.

'Walk' is a familiar biblical expression, for to walk simply means to proceed, to continue at a normal pace through life. Each of us is going to walk through life one day at a time, in whatever fashion we choose. John is asking us to do no less than to let God, his Word, and his will to become what guides us. He does not ask for us to force ourselves to do or to become anything unnatural, but instead to let God into every area of our lives, so that he can do as he wishes.

To put all of these ideas together, what we find is that God considers it love when we willingly allow him to take center stage as we walk through life, to let what he tells us be our guide, rather than the teachings of the world. There is, of course, much more implied in John's statement, but once we can appreciate the basic idea we can get much more out of the passage.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2008

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WALKING IN THE TRUTH: THE SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

Week Four: Many Deceivers (2 John 1:7-8)

Many erroneously think of an "antichrist" as a super-villain or super-sinner, someone who commits violent atrocities or tries to take over the world. Another error is to associate "the antichrist" with the book of Revelation, when in fact Revelation does not even mention any "antichrist". (Revelation talks about two beasts, one from the earth and one from the sea, and of course it talks about Satan, the dragon, but none of these are the same as the "antichrist".) Only the books of 1 John and 2 John discuss "antichrists", and what they do tell us is much different - and more important - than the common conception of an antichrist.

An antichrist is, simply, a seemingly spiritual or religious teacher who denies that Jesus Christ, God's Son, came to live on earth in human form (1:7). This definition may not thrill the flesh, but it is spiritually appropriate and logical. God chose, amongst many possible options, to reveal himself most fully by coming in the form of a human. In this form, he taught us what matters most to him, and he died as a blood sacrifice for the sins of all who believe in him. To deny this, even in the name of God or in the name of spirituality, is to become, literally, an anti-Christ.

This is by no means a mere technical point. Deceivers who set themselves up as religious leaders or teachers, but who do so without confessing the living Jesus Christ, are opposing God even more directly than any dictator or mass murderer. The world's evil villains may destroy thousands or millions of lives, but false religions and philosophies destroy billions of souls. Which matters most to us? More importantly, which matters most to God?

Though John is writing in order to encourage his friend, he also cautions her not to be taken in by deceivers (1:8). There will always be humans who do not wish to submit themselves humbly to God, and the human mind is capable of creating any number of alternatives that seem right when viewed with fleshly logic. Thus even the most faithful and most mature of believers should always compare every belief, every assumption, every teaching, with God's Word and will.

None of us is wise enough or humble enough to claim that we understand everything about God. We all have weaknesses and fleshly desires that make us vulnerable to deception at the hands of Satan, the prince of this world. It is not an insult for us to remind each other always to keep coming back to God's Word for the truth, always to keep praying to God that he will teach us what we need to know, and always to remember how much we still do not understand.

John does not tell his friend about these false teachers in order to make her paranoid or judgmental. He does not ask for her to go out and hunt down erroneous doctrines or teachings. What he does ask is for her to guard her own heart in humility, so that she may continue to experience the genuine spiritual blessings that come from God, not the false promises that come from worldly teachers. And, of course, this is what God asks of us.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2008*
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WALKING IN THE TRUTH: THE SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

Week Five: The Danger Of "Running Ahead" (2 John 1:9-11)

John has repeatedly mentioned the importance of truth, because he knows how easy it is for mortal beings to be led astray. And, as he has also mentioned, there is never any shortage of false teachers and deceivers who promote something resembling Christianity, but without the crucified and resurrected Christ as its foundation. Thus John now issues a caution that we not 'run ahead' of the gospel itself. The gospel was not meant for one particular generation or one particular location, but for everyone, everywhere who needs forgiveness for sins.

The apostle's exhortation to continue in the teaching of Jesus (1:9) is easily stated, but hard to practice. The gospel message is both simple and powerful. Its simplicity makes it hard to accept for those who consider themselves sophisticated or learned, and its power makes it hard to accept for those who think they are too strong or righteous to need as much help as everyone else.

In the church, we too often confuse the issue by getting derailed on account of side issues. The gospel rests on two important themes: the universal human need for grace, mercy, and forgiveness; and the unlimited willingness of God to do all he can to provide these things that we need. Jesus Christ came in the flesh because only a willing, perfect, and voluntary blood sacrifice could provide the full and lasting supply of grace that we need.

If we make the gospel about anything less important than these things, then we are in danger of what John calls 'running ahead'. Many Christians who would react in horror at the thought of inappropriate worship activities or immoral worldly pastimes are nevertheless quite comfortable using the gospel as a pretext to promote their personal preferences in political, social, or cultural issues. All such things are side issues, and when we get excited or agitated by them it is mainly because we forget or ignore how great our need is for God's continuing grace.

Thus, when John warns his friend not to help or encourage anyone who is 'running ahead' (1:10-11), he is not talking about someone who is trying to introduce church organs or other inappropriate objects of worship. He is, rather, warning us not to treat Christianity as a mere philosophical, political, or social phenomenon. He is reminding us that any form of the gospel that does not rest on and proclaim a crucified and resurrected Christ is no gospel at all.

Thus we too would do well to heed John's caution. To remain in the teachings of the Father and the Son, it is not sufficient merely to keep organs and guitars out of our worship assemblies. God wants us to remember what the gospel was meant to do, and to focus on the crucial needs that it supplies. If we could ever keep ourselves focused on the right priorities, then we might be surprised at how many other things God would also take care of for us.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2008

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WALKING IN THE TRUTH: THE SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

Week Six: Completing Our Joy (2 John 1:12-13)

Because John sincerely cares about the friends to whom he writes, he mixes encouragement with caution, and praises with warnings. He cares more about his friends' relationship with God than he does about their opinions of him. This does not indicate any lack of affection or compassion on John's part. In these closing verses, the apostle shows us a glimpse of his personal feelings, and in so doing he leaves us with some things to think about.

As he indicates also at the end of 3 John, the apostle expresses his hope of soon seeing his friend(s) in person (1:12). He says that he has "much to write to you", but implies that he would greatly prefer a personal conversation. We can never know, of course, exactly what John wished to discuss with his friends, but it is not completely out of place to consider it. John hardly seems likely to have taken an interest in the kinds of trivia or gossip that worldly persons find so interesting. More probably, he wished to share his thoughts on God and his praises about God with others whom he knew would appreciate them.

Many Christians are willing and eager to follow at least part of John's example, and indeed it is commendable to desire to meet with other believers. But how do we spend this time? What do we talk about? If we simply discuss and debate the same sporting events, political issues, or disaster news that consumes the worldly, then we can hardly expect any particular commendation from God. It is a blessing from God whenever he brings us together with others who also believe and trust our Lord. Accordingly, we will do well to use such occasions (at least in part) to encourage one another to draw ever closer to God.

As do many epistles in the New Testament, 2 John closes with a greeting (1:13). Rather than routinely 'skipping over' these greetings, it is a good idea to ask why the Holy Spirit has preserved them for us. Sometimes these personal greetings can shed light on the faith of otherwise unheralded characters in the Scriptures. And if nothing else, in a general way they remind us of what blessing it is to know that other believers all over the world are living by faith and grace, just as we are.

It is easy for us to become focused on our own needs and on circumstances around us - which makes it that much more worthwhile to hear word from Christians elsewhere. Just as Paul's letters often took note of what believers were doing in various places, so also most of us know of Christians in many different areas. This can encourage us, if for no other reason than the awareness of how many parts of the world are home to someone who loves and seeks God.

Throughout 2 John, the apostle has emphasized the joy we can have in seeing and knowing that others also are living by faith and walking in the truth. We should not need numerical results or attention-getting activities to rejoice in God. If we can learn to value each individual soul as God does, then we can find much to rejoice about every time we meet with our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Every faithful Christian we know gives us a very good reason for eternal joy.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2008

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