

*The Letters of John:
Truth and Love
A Study Guide*

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All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable
for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. *2 Timothy 3:16*

The author thanks members of the men's Bible study at Rose Hill Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC, who used an earlier version of this material. Their feedback has made this study guide a better book. Any errors, irrelevance, and lack of clarity that remain are entirely my own failings.

ABBREVIATIONS

ESV. English Standard Version
KJV. King James Version
NIV. New International Version
NKJV. New King James Version
RSV. Revised Standard Version
WCF. Westminster Confession of Faith
WSC. Westminster Shorter Catechism

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THE LETTERS OF JOHN: TRUTH AND LOVE

In addition to the Gospel of John and Revelation, the New Testament contains three other books attributed to the Apostle John: 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John. None of these books names its author directly, but from the earliest days of the Christian era the church has believed the Apostle John to be their author. The vocabulary, concepts, and style of these books are so similar that almost all scholars or commentators, conservatives and liberals alike, believe them to be by the same hand. And they share so much in common with the Gospel of John—again, the vocabulary, concepts, and style—that nearly as many scholars and commentators believe that all four books have the same author.¹

1 John has some features characteristic of letters written in the Greco-Roman world but lacks other characteristic features. In some respects it seems to be a hybrid between a letter and a theological treatise. 2 John and 3 John are definitely letters addressed to individuals (or possibly, in the case of 2 John, to a local church personified as an “elect lady”; see the study notes for 2 John). Commentators generally agree that John wrote these letters late in life, around or after 90 AD. He probably wrote them from Ephesus, in the Roman province of Asia, now western Turkey.

All three letters were written to maintain key truths of the faith that were being denied at that time, in word or in deed, by certain persons. These letters also praise true Christian behavior and commend it to John’s readers. The warnings and teachings of John’s letters find many contemporary applications some two thousand years later,.

This study guide contains fifteen lessons. Each lesson consists of a series of readings, questions, answers, and notes. The answers and notes do not provide all the answers that could be given or exhaust all that could be said on the topics they raise, but they should start the reader thinking and lead to profitable class discussion.

Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version; however, those who are accustomed to using other versions of the Bible will have no trouble following and using this study guide.

¹ The Gospel of John is also anonymous. The author simply refers to himself as the disciple Jesus loved. But the united testimony of the early church is that the Apostle John wrote both the gospel and the letters (or epistles) that now bear his name. There is no reason to doubt this tradition.

1 JOHN

LESSON 1: 1 JOHN 1:1-4

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is John referring to in v. 1 by the phrase, *word of life*? Verses 1:1-4, 14 of John's *gospel* contain the answer.
2. Why is John qualified to write about the word of life? *v. 1*
3. To what experience does John refer when he speaks of seeing and looking upon and touching the word of life with his hands? *v. 1*
4. The word of life was from the beginning, *v. 1*. What beginning is that?
5. The life John refers to is eternal and was with the Father before it was made manifest (plain) to John, *v. 2*. Explain.
6. John writes these words in the first person plural—*we*, not *I*, *vs. 1-5*. Who are the others who shared his experience?
7. Why is John writing this letter? *vs. 3-4*
8. Is John writing to Christians or non-Christians?
9. What reward does John expect for writing this letter? *v. 4*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is John referring to in v. 1 by the phrase, “word of life”? Verses 1:1-4, 14 of John’s gospel contain the answer.

Jesus Christ is the Word (John 1:1), and he came to give life:

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. *John 1:4*

I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. *John 10:10*

I am the way, the truth, and the life. *John 14:6*

2. Why is John qualified to write about the word of life? v. 1

He was an eyewitness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. His is no hearsay or second-hand account.

3. To what experience does John refer when he speaks of seeing and looking upon and touching the word of life with his hands? v. 1

John was one of the original disciples and was with Jesus from the beginning to the end of the three years of Jesus’ earthly ministry. “Touched with our hands” may refer, not to John’s own experience, but to that of Thomas, (John 20:24-29); John’s use of the plural in these verses would allow that (see the answer to study question 6).

4. The word of life was from the beginning, v. 1. What beginning is that?

It may be the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, or it may refer to the beginning of all things, that is, the creation:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. *John 1:1-2*

A reference to either beginning would fit John’s introduction. See study note 4.

5. The life John refers to is eternal and was with the Father before it was made manifest (plain) to John, v. 2. Explain.

The Word was with God the Father from all eternity, but was made manifest to the world when, as Jesus of Nazareth, he became flesh and blood in the incarnation:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father....No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known. *John 1:14, 18*

6. John writes these words in the first person plural—we, not I, vs. 1-5. Who are the others who shared his experience?

The other apostles. They all were commissioned as witnesses to Jesus’ life, teaching, death, and resurrection.

7. Why is John writing this letter? vs. 3-4

He writes with two purposes in mind:

a. He wants his readers to have fellowship with him, the same fellowship he has with the Father and the Son.

b. He writes so that his (or possibly their) joy may be complete. See study note 6.

8. Is John writing to Christians or non-Christians?

He is probably writing to both. Readers who are born again already have fellowship with God, though perhaps not with John, since he writes as if he has never met them (but see Lesson 3, study note 1). However, in the following paragraph, vs. 5-10, he writes as though he fears his readers may think they are good enough in themselves, without the sin-cleansing blood of Christ. Such self-deluded persons are not real Christians, even if they associate with true believers and think themselves Christians. John wrote to enable his readers to examine their hearts and lives so that they would know if they were truly born of God. For the truly born again, the letter gives assurance. For those who have deceived themselves, it provides a wake-up call.

9. What reward does John expect for writing this letter? v. 4

He hopes for greater joy. He writes that his joy and that of his associates may be complete.

STUDY NOTES

1. John

The writer of 1 John does not identify himself, but the early church believed that the Apostle John wrote it as well as 2 John, 3 John, the Gospel of John, and the Book of Revelation, which is the only book that explicitly bears the name John.

John was one of Jesus' original apostles. Before he met Jesus he was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. Mark describes John's calling to be a disciple this way:

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee he [Jesus] saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. *Mark 1:16-20*

It was later in Jesus' ministry that he set apart twelve of his disciples, including John, to be apostles (Matthew 10:1-4).

John bore a special relation to Jesus among the apostles. He describes himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:20, 24). Jesus loved all the apostles (John 13:34), but John was special.

2. The Gospel of John and 1 John.

In this lesson's scripture John introduces *the word of life*, *the beginning*, *eternal life*, and *eternal life made manifest* without any explanation or background. These concepts are first introduced in the Gospel of John. In Lesson 2 we will encounter the concepts of spiritual *light* and *darkness* and *walking in the light*, also concepts first developed in John's gospel. As mentioned in the introduction to this study guide, the similarity of vocabulary and concepts in John's gospel and these letters is the strongest evidence that they came from the same hand.

Of more importance to Bible students than the question of authorship is the matter of understanding what we read. One cannot easily understand 1 John without referring to the Gospel of John. It seems likely that John wrote his gospel first, as an evangelistic tool (John 20:30-31). The letters which followed after were written to deal with specific problems that arose in the Christian communities that had received John's gospel.

3. The word or the Word?

The phrase "word of life," v. 1, is rendered "Word of life" in the New International Version (NIV), The New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the New King James Version (NKJV). The earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament were written in a script that did not distinguish between upper and lower-case forms. Consequently, whether the translator renders the Greek *logos* as *word* or *Word* depends on his interpretation of the phrase. *Word of life* refers to Jesus Christ; *word of life* refers to the message of life that John brings to his readers. Either meaning is suitable here.

4. The beginning.

As with *word of life/Word of life* (study note 3), John's reference to the *beginning* admits of two interpretations. John may be referring to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Alternatively, he may have in mind the beginning of creation. Either beginning would fit John's letter. A reference to the beginning of Jesus' ministry would reinforce John's claim to be a credible witness to all Jesus did and taught. A reference to the beginning of creation would call to mind John's assertion that Jesus the Word made and gave life to all things (John 1:3-4).

5. Fellowship with God and his people.

John writes so that his readers may have *fellowship* with him and his companions. What does that mean?

The Greek word here translated *fellowship* means having or sharing something in common, joint participation in something, communion, intimacy. It was used to describe something as secular as a business partnership (Luke 5:10) and as spiritual as sharing the life of Christ.

It is in the latter sense that John wants fellowship with his readers. He goes on immediately (v. 3) to tell them: “our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” John wants more than simple friendship, certainly more than sharing a church supper once a month. He and his companions are members of the church, the body of Christ, and they share the life of Christ. In sharing the life of Christ they are bound together as the limbs and organs of a body are bound together. John wants his readers to share in that intimate union with Christ and with himself. See 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

6. Our joy or your joy?

Verse 4 in the ESV concludes, “so that our joy may be complete.” “Our joy” is also found in the NIV, the NASB, and the RSV. But the KJV and the NKJV read “your joy.” The difference arises from the fact that some of the oldest Greek manuscripts read “our” and others read “your.” All the translations contain a footnote giving the variant form they did not choose to put into the text. Both variants make sense in the context of what John is writing, and it seems impossible to know for sure which word John wrote in his letter.

LESSON 2: 1 JOHN 1:5-10

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the message—the word of life—John proclaims to his readers? *v. 5*

2. The words *light* and *darkness* do not denote physical light and darkness. Read the following passages in the Gospel of John and summarize what John means by *light* and *darkness*: *John 1:4-9, 3:19-21, 8:12*.

3. John says that if one *walks in darkness* he has no fellowship with God.
 - a. What does it mean to *walk in darkness*? *v. 6*.

 - b. Why can one have no fellowship with God if he walks in darkness?

4. a. What does it mean to *walk in the light*? *v. 7*
 - b. What results from walking in the light?

5. Does walking in the light mean living a sinless life? *vs. 7b-8*

6. a. Do you know anyone who claims to have no sin? *v. 8*
 - b. What can we say about the person who claims to have no sin? *vs. 8, 10*

7. What is the remedy for our sin? *v. 7b*

8. How do we avail ourselves of that remedy? *v. 9*

9. What reason do we have for believing that if we confess our sins God will forgive them? *v. 9*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the message—the word of life—John proclaims to his readers? v. 5

“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”

2. The words *light* and *darkness* do not denote physical light and darkness. Read the following passages in the Gospel of John and summarize what John means by *light* and *darkness*: John 1:4-9, 3:19-21, 8:12.

a. John uses light as a metaphor for life, as did David in Psalm 36:9. See John 1:4.

b. John also uses light as a figure for the knowledge of God and of Christ. This figure is common in Scripture; see Psalm 119:105, Isaiah 2:5 and 9:2, Romans 13:12, 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, Ephesians 5:13-14, and 1 Peter 2:9.

c. Finally, John uses light to represent holiness and righteousness, as does the Apostle Paul in Romans 13:12-13, 2 Corinthians 6:14 and Ephesians 5:11.

3. John says that if one walks in darkness he has no fellowship with God.

a. What does it mean to walk in darkness? v. 6

In these verses it means to live a sinful life. Elsewhere in Scripture it also means to live in ignorance of God (Isaiah 42:16, Matthew 15:14).

b. Why can one have no fellowship with God if he walks in darkness?

God is light, and in him is no darkness at all; that is, he is holy and righteous altogether. Light—holiness—can have no fellowship—nothing in common—with darkness—sin and unrighteousness (2 Corinthians 6:14).

4. a. What does it mean to walk in the light? v. 7

It means to live a holy life. John will spell that out beginning in chapter 2.

b. What results from walking in the light?

If we walk in the light we have fellowship with one another. “One another” may refer to our fellowship with God, since John has just affirmed that if we walk in darkness we cannot have fellowship with God. Alternatively, it may refer to our fellowship with other Christians, since that is why John is proclaiming his message to his readers (v. 3). It’s not that important to specify precisely who “one another” refers to, since if Christians have fellowship with God they have fellowship with each other also (v. 3).

5. Does walking in the light mean living a sinless life? vs. 7b-8

No. John states that explicitly in vs. 8 and 10, where he urges us to confess our sins that we may be forgiven.

6. a. Do you know anyone who claims to have no sin? v. 8

Class discussion. No names, please, but tell what they have said in claiming to have no sin.

b. What can we say about the person who claims to have no sin? vs. 8, 10

He deceives himself. He has neither truth nor God’s word in him. Even worse, if that were possible, he makes God a liar, for God has declared that all are sinners. (Romans 3:9-20, 23).

7. What is the remedy for our sin? v. 7b

The blood of Jesus Christ was shed to atone for our sins, to make propitiation for them, and to cleanse us from them.

8. How do we avail ourselves of that remedy? v. 9

We confess our sins to God and plead the blood of Christ.

9. What reason do we have for believing that if we confess our sins God will forgive them? v. 9

God is faithful and just. We can trust him to be faithful to his promise to forgive the penitent. He is just in doing so because the penalty for our sins has been paid (Romans 3:21-26).

STUDY NOTES

1. Faith and righteous living.

John's message for his readers is that one cannot consider one's self a Christian if one continues to live a sinful lifestyle. A Christian is a person who has fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. God is holy and righteous (light) and will not, cannot have fellowship with sin. One who lives an unholy, unrighteous life deceives one's self by claiming to have fellowship with God.

Sadly, tragically, there are many who think they are forgiven and on their way to heaven even though they unconcernedly continue to live sinful lives. They overlook the many, many scriptures that speak of the necessity of keeping the commandments and law of Christ:

If you love me you will keep my commandments. *John 14:15*

If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. *John 15:10*

But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit....For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death...in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit....For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law....Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. *Romans 7:6, 8:2, 4, 7-8*

John will return to this truth again and again in his letter.

2. No sin?

John warns against thinking we have no sin. Most Christians can't imagine thinking such a thing, but some people do. There are at least three kinds of people who think they have no sin.

a. First, there are *those who refuse to recognize as sin behavior the Bible clearly condemns as sin*. For example, in our day some believe voluntary homosexual relations between same-sex couples who love each other are not sinful. Some of them twist the Scripture to persuade themselves and others that the Bible does not really condemn homosexuality *per se*, but only involuntary, non-loving homosexual acts.² Others who deny that homosexuality is sin think that we are more enlightened now than were Moses and the Apostle Paul, whose writings condemn homosexuality. Those men, they say, were not inspired by God; they simply expressed the views of a less enlightened age. Surely those who think this way make God out to be a liar (v. 10).

b. Others don't deny that what the Bible calls sin is sin, but believe that *they are no longer sinners because they are no longer under the law, but under grace*. Not being under law, they can do what they want, and God will not even see it because it is covered by the blood of Christ. Their thinking is summarized in a sarcastic couplet:

Released from the law, O happy condition! I can sin all I want, and not go to perdition!

This view is called *antinomianism*, and it has been around since the apostolic era. The Apostle Paul was accused of teaching it, a charge he strenuously denied:

And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just. *Romans 3:8*

² One author claims that Sodom was destroyed, not because its inhabitants wanted to sodomize Lot's angelic visitors, Genesis 19:5, but because its residents were not good stewards of the earth!

What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! *Romans 6:1*

Paul affirms that we are not under the Law of Moses as a means of pursuing salvation, but he strongly affirms that we are under the law of Christ, the law of the Spirit, as the way of life for those who have been saved by grace.

But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. *Romans 7:6*

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. *Romans 8:3-4*

Paul agrees with John that even the born-again Christian sins. In Romans 7:18-19 he cites his own experience:

For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

c. Some Christians believe they have no sin because *they have been made incapable of sinning*. They have been baptized by the Holy Spirit and are now in a state of sinless perfection. They believe that sins are conscious, knowing, willing acts of disobedience to God. They believe they have been cleansed of the old, sinful nature and that they do not, indeed cannot voluntarily sin. Whatever sinful deeds they commit are involuntary or stem from ignorance; they don't count as sins in God's sight.

The latter view can be traced back to godly John Wesley, the father of the Methodist Church and other holiness denominations.³ Wesley believed that the saved can receive a “second blessing” from God in which the “old man,” the original sinful human nature, is eradicated.⁴ Those who receive the second blessing are no longer able to sin. Those who have received the second blessing endeavor to live holy lives, and they believe that now they actually do so. I have heard that some adherents to this theory claim they haven’t sinned in years, though I haven’t personally met anyone who made such a bold, preposterous claim.

The sinless perfection or second blessing theory is demolished by these few verses from 1 John, as well as by Christian experience. The Apostle Paul certainly did not hold it:

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me....Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Romans 7:15-20, 24-25*

3. Forgiven and cleansed from sin.

The promise of forgiveness is a wonderful promise. We all need forgiveness, and God promises even more than forgiveness: he promises to *cleanse* us from the sin that besets us. But the question of *when* we are cleansed from sin is one that Christians answer differently.

Some believe that we are first cleansed from our sins when we are baptized. This is the position of the Roman Catholic Church and some other Christians as well. They acknowledge that the baptized do sin and need both forgiveness and cleansing. In the Roman Catholic understanding of absolution, forgiveness is granted by a priest in the sacrament of Penance.⁵ The Roman church believes that cleansing is accomplished in purgatory.

The classical Protestant view is that, while our sins are forgiven when we trust in Christ, we will not be completely cleansed from sin until we are resurrected. As we live the Christian life, God works in us to sanctify us more and more, that is, to make us die more and more to sin and live more and more to righteousness. The process of sanctification is not completed in this life. Even at the end of our days we will have to confess that our thoughts, words, and actions are still stained by sin. As long as we are on this earth we will always need to confess our sins and seek forgiveness and cleansing, knowing that the cleansing will not be complete until we see Jesus face to face. Then, at death, or at the resurrection for those who are alive when the Lord returns, we will be freed from the sinful flesh and will be instantly and entirely sanctified:

I. The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies

3 Some medieval groups of Christians held similar views, but because Wesley’s teaching has persisted to the present day, it is the one I describe here.

4 Wesley never personally claimed to have received the second blessing.

5 This understanding is consistent with the false Roman Catholic view of justification, which merges *justification*, God’s declaration that we are righteous and guiltless in his sight, and *sanctification*, God’s work in making us holy.

II. At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up, with the selfsame bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls forever. *Westminster Confession of Faith XXXII*

LESSON 3: 1 JOHN 2:1-6

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is John's purpose in writing? *v. 1*
2. What is the remedy for our sin after we have become Christians? *vs. 1-2*
3. What is a *propitiation*? See the dictionary.
4. What makes Jesus Christ a suitable propitiation? *v. 1b; also Leviticus 22:17-25*
5. How is Jesus the propitiation for not only our sins, but the sins of the whole world? *v. 2, also John 3:16, 2 Peter 3:9*
6. Find two verses in chapter 1 that are parallel to 2:3-5.
7. Based on your answer to study question 6, what is the practical meaning of *walking in the light*? Of *walking in darkness*? *1:7*
8. Reconcile 2:4 and 1:10.
9. Interpret 2:6 in the light of 1:6.

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is John's purpose in writing? v. 1

He writes to strengthen his readers so that they will not sin.

2. What is the remedy for our sin after we have become Christians? vs. 1-2

We have Jesus as our advocate before the Father. He will plead his blood as a sacrifice for our sins when we ask for forgiveness.

3. What is a propitiation? See the dictionary.

Webster's dictionary defines *propitiation* as:

1. The act of appeasing the wrath and conciliating the favor of an offended person.
2. Atonement or atoning sacrifice; specifically, the influence or effects of the death of Christ in appeasing the divine justice and conciliating the divine favor.

4. What makes Jesus Christ a suitable propitiation? v. 1b; also Leviticus 22:17-25

He is righteous, the only righteous person who ever lived. An atoning sacrifice under the Law of Moses had to be without blemish. This symbolized that the coming One who would be the true sacrifice for our sins had to be sinless and morally perfect.

5. How is Jesus the propitiation for not only our sins, but the sins of the whole world? v. 2, also John 3:16, 2 Peter 3:9

The offer of forgiveness and life based on the propitiatory death of Christ is an offer made to the whole world. "Whosoever will" may come to Christ. He will not cast out anyone who comes to him in faith. God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Christ died for a multitude which no one will be able to number, drawn from every tongue and people and nation—drawn from the whole world. But this truth does not mean that everyone will actually be saved.

6. Find two verses in chapter 1 that are parallel to 2:3-5.

Verses 7 and 8 of chapter 1 are parallel to vs. 3-5 of chapter 2. Both 1:7-8 and 2:3-5 state the truth that those who live righteous lives know God and have fellowship with him, but those who do not acknowledge their sin while claiming to know him are liars.

7. Based on your answer to study question 6, what is the practical meaning of walking in the light? Of walking in darkness? 1:7

To walk in the light is to keep Christ's commandments, particularly the commandment to love one another. To walk in darkness is to ignore or disobey his commandments, particularly the command to love one another.

8. Reconcile 2:4 and 1:10.

Those who keep Christ's commandments still fall into sin, but their lifestyle is not one of sin. Even the holiest people sin. See Romans 7:14-8:4.

9. Interpret 2:6 in the light of 1:6.

To abide in Christ (2:6) is to have fellowship with him (1:6). Those who abide in him and have fellowship with him are those who walk (live) like Christ. Those who walk in darkness (that is, live sinful lives) and say they have fellowship with Christ are liars. See the answer to study question 6.

STUDY NOTES

1. “My little children.”

John addresses his readers as “my little children” (2:1). While 1:3 might suggest that John was writing to establish fellowship for the first time with people he had not previously known, the phrase “my little children” may indicate that he not only knew them, but that it was John who had brought them to life in Christ.

Paul similarly referred to his converts as his dear children:

...my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!
Galatians 4:19

And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. *2 Corinthians 12:14*

But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. *1 Thessalonians 2:7*

John often refers to his readers as children or little children (2:12-13, 2:18, 2:28, 3:4, 3:18, 5:21). He loved them and wanted to make sure they were true children of God (3:1-2); then he could be sure they were his children also.

2. The test of a true Christian.

John enumerates the manifold blessings of a genuine Christian in various ways. The genuine Christian has fellowship with God (1:6), has been cleansed from all sin and unrighteousness (1:7, 9), has come to know God (2:4), is in him (2:5), and abides in him (2:6). Later in the letter he will say that the genuine Christian abides in the light (2:10), has been anointed by the Holy One and has knowledge (2:20), abides in the Son and in the Father (2:24), has been born of God (2:29), and is God’s child (3:1-2).

But, intermixed with the blessings of a true Christian, John sets forth several tests for knowing for sure whether one is genuine, not a Christian in name only. In 1:6 John stated the first of such tests: “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.” Here in 2:3-6 we have two more tests.

a. The genuine Christian keeps Christ’s commandments. John will speak of the Lord’s great commandment, the commandment to love one another, later in the chapter. Those who do not keep Christ’s commandments are liars when they claim to know him.

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. *2:3-5*.

b. The genuine Christian walks as Christ did; that is, he lives in righteousness and holiness.

By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked, *2:6*.

John will go on to state more tests we are to apply to ourselves to confirm our calling and election (2 Peter 1:7). And apply them we must: multitudes will be astonished on the Day of Judgment to find that they are condemned to eternal punishment:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name?”

And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.
Matthew 7:21-23

John does not want those he evangelized and nurtured to be among that number!

3. Saved by perseverance in good works?

Some might draw the wrong conclusion from what John has written up to this point. They might think we are saved by Christ's life and death for us as we cast ourselves on him in faith, confessing our sins and seeking forgiveness and new life, BUT that we must subsequently live righteous lives and keep Christ's commandments in order to maintain our status as God's children.

The view summarized in the preceding paragraph is all too common among Protestants as well as Roman Catholics, but it is wrong. The correct, biblical view is that our lives as Christians are the RESULT of our being born again. They are the fruit that proves the tree to be good, as Jesus said.

Every healthy tree bears good fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. *Matthew 7:17-20*

In short, we live righteous lives, keep Christ's commandments, and love one another BECAUSE we have been born again. If we don't continue to live this way it is an indication that we were never truly saved, not that we were once saved but lost our salvation by turning to an evil life style.

All this is true in spite of the fact that we fall into sin all too often. But, as John already said, 1:8-9, we confess those sins, and God is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. *Cleansing* means that he is at work to sanctify us, to make us ever more holy in our lives. John and the other New Testament writers urge us on to live these more holy lives, not to earn salvation, but to show that we are saved.

LESSON 4: 1 JOHN 2: 7-17

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. John is writing not a new commandment, but an old one. What makes it an old commandment?
v. 7
2. What is the beginning John refers to in 2:7? See also Lesson 1, study note 4.
3. Verses 9-10 reveal what the old commandment is. What is it? See also John 13:34-34.
4. The commandment to love one another is the old commandment, yet it is new. How is it new?
v. 8
5. Verses 9-10 give us another test of life, to show us whether or not we are genuine Christians. What is that test?
6. What does hating our brother do to our lives? *v. 11*
7. What three groups are addressed in vs. 12-14?
8. Why in particular does John write to the little children? *vs. 12, 13b*
9. Why in particular does John write to the fathers? *vs. 13, 14*
10. Why in particular does John write to the young men? *vs. 13, 14b*

11. Find a place in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, that teaches much the same thing as v. 15.

12. How does v. 16 describe Adam and Eve's temptation in the garden? *Genesis 3:6*

13. It's a bad bargain to choose the world over God. Why? *v. 17*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. John is writing not a new commandment, but an old one. What makes it an old commandment? v. 7

Christ's followers have had it from the beginning.

2. What is the beginning John refers to in 2:7? See also Lesson 1, study note 4.

It is the beginning of Christ's earthly ministry.

3. Verses 9-10 reveal what the old commandment is. What is it? See also John 13:34-34.

It is the command to love one another.

4. The commandment to love one another is the old commandment, yet it is new. How is it new? v. 8

It is new in that it has become operable in the lives of John's readers. They are walking in the light, and for them the darkness of sin is passing away.

5. Verses 9-10 give us another test of life, to show us whether or not we are genuine Christians. What is that test?

If we love our brothers (that is, if we are obeying the old/new commandment Jesus gave us), then we abide in the light, which is to say that we have fellowship with God. If we hate our brothers in Christ we are still in darkness: we have no fellowship with God, no spiritual life.

6. What does hating our brother do to our lives? v. 11

It keeps us in spiritual darkness and we do not know where we are going, that is, we have no guidance from God to lead us on our way.

7. What three groups are addressed in vs. 12-14?

Little children (or children), fathers, and young men. See study note 2 for discussion of who John means by these terms.

8. Why in particular does John write to the little children? vs. 12, 13b

He writes to them because their sins have been forgiven and they have come to know the Father.

9. Why in particular does John write to the fathers? vs. 13, 14

John writes to them because they know "him who is from the beginning," that is, Jesus Christ. See the answer to question 3.

10. Why in particular does John write to the young men? vs. 13, 14b

They have experienced the temptations of youth and have overcome them. In so doing they have overcome the Evil One himself.

11. Find a place in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, that teaches the much same thing as v. 15.

Matthew 6:22-24.

12. How does v. 16 describe Adam and Eve's temptation in the garden? Genesis 3:6

Their temptation involved:

- a. The desires of the flesh: "the woman saw that the tree was good for food."
- b. The desires of the eyes: "the woman saw that [the tree] was a delight to the eyes."
- c. Pride in possessions (KJV: the pride of life): "the tree was to be desired to make one wise."

13. Why is it a bad bargain to choose the world over God? v. 17

The world and its desires are passing away, whereas God is everlasting. "For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

STUDY NOTES

1. Love is not optional.

Christ *commanded* us to love one another. Loving our brothers and sisters in Christ is not optional. But we are not naturally attracted to all of our fellow Christians. Some of them may rub us the wrong way; others we hardly know, even in our local church. How can we love them?

The answer is found in Scripture. The Apostle Paul wrote:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. *1 Corinthians 13:4-7*

Later in this letter John says:

By this we know love, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and truth. *3:16-18*

Scripture tells us that love is not so much affection as action. It is in our actions that we love one another. If we grudgingly do the things John lists above, or do them with hatred in our hearts we cannot call our actions love (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). But Jesus said that where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. If we invest our time, energy, and worldly good in others, affection and the emotional component of love will follow.

2. Children, fathers, young men.

In vs. 12-14 John addresses three classes of readers, perhaps four: children, fathers, and young men, telling them why he is writing to them.

Many commentators view the little children as new Christians. They are young spiritually, not chronologically. It is because they have been forgiven for the sake of Jesus' name that he addresses them. He wants their first love to be an informed first love, one that is more than an emotional love born of gratitude. It needs to show itself in action towards fellow believers. There is a tendency to think of "just me and Jesus" in the early days of one's faith.

Other commentators make a distinction between the "little children" of v. 12 and the "children" of v. 13. The Greek word translated "little children" in v. 12 is the same word John uses elsewhere in the letter to describe those who simply are Christians; the word translated "children" in v. 13 always or almost always refers to those who are young in years.

The fathers are those who have been Christians a long time. John's exhortation to love one another is necessary for them, too, for like those in Ephesus, to whom John wrote in Revelation 2:1-7, even though they have known the Father for many years they may have lost their first love.

The young men who have overcome the temptations of the Evil One also need to hear John's reminder to keep the old-new commandment to love each other. People who are victorious in battling Satan can become judgmental towards their brothers and sisters who may stumble and fall more frequently in the fight.

John does not mention mothers in the faith or young women who, like young men, experience the temptations of youth, but the exhortation is the same for them and for any other class of Christians. None of us finds it easy to love one another as we ought. Yet we *all* have the command to love one another, and God's Spirit will make it true in us, v. 8, in every-increasing measure as we make use of the means of grace he provides (Ephesians 4:11-16).

3. Bad love.

Love for one another is the right kind of love; love for the world is the wrong kind. It is the very opposite of love for God.

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. *Matthew 6:24*

Money here is a surrogate for the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and pride in possessions, for men think enough money can obtain the objects of those desires.

Some Christians think they can love God *and* have the things of the world they desire—the prosperity gospel will always have many adherents. But it doesn't work that way. Love by its very nature is monogamous and jealous. When Scripture tells us that God is a jealous God, it means he wants our all.

I the LORD your God am a jealous God. *Exodus 20:5*

And behold a lawyer stood up to put [Jesus] to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." *Luke 10: 25-28*

Note that love of neighbor does not impinge on love of God. As John tells us here, we can love God with all our being and still have love for our neighbor. We are to love one another and not to love the world. Loving the world would replace love for God; loving one another complements love of God.

LESSON 5: 1 JOHN 2: 18-29

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How do John's readers know it is the last hour? *v. 18*
2. We often speak of the Antichrist who is to appear before Christ's second coming, identifying him with the beast of Revelation 13-19. What does John say about antichrist? *v. 18*
3. Verse 18 tells us who "they" of v. 19 were. Who were they?
4. "They" went out from "us," v. 19. Who are the "us" of v. 19?
5. How could John's readers know who is really of the truth? *vs. 20-21*
6. What is the anointing of which John writes in vs. 20 and 27? See John 14:15-16, 25.
7. What makes someone an antichrist? *v. 22*
8. What does denying the Son entail? *v. 23*
9. What results from letting the teaching we have heard from the beginning abide in us? *vs. 24-25*
10. Who was trying to deceive John's readers? What was the nature of the deception they sought to spread? Re-read vs. 18-25.

11. John is confident that his readers will not be deceived. What is the basis of his confidence? *v. 27*

12. What must we do so that we will not be ashamed when Jesus comes again? *vs 28-29*

13. How can we know we are born of God? *v. 29*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How do John's readers know it is the last hour? v. 18

Many antichrists have come.

2. We often speak of the Antichrist who is to appear before Christ's second coming, identifying him with the beast of Revelation 13-19. What does John say about antichrist? v. 18

There are many antichrists, not just the one to come at the end of the age.

3. Verse 18 tells us who "they" of v. 19 were. Who were they?

The word *they* refers to the subjects of the previous verse, the antichrists who had already appeared.

4. "They" went out from "us," v. 19. Who are the "us" of v. 19?

"Us" would refer to John and his companions. The antichrists originally identified themselves as Christians and associated with John and the church, but then repudiated Christ (v. 22) and separated from John and the Christian community.

5. How could John's readers know who is really of the truth? vs. 20-21

True Christians, those who have fellowship with God (1:3 and 7), have an anointing from the Holy One (God), which gave them knowledge of the truth so that they know who speaks the truth and who does not.

6. What is the anointing of which John writes in vs. 20 and 27? See John 14:15-16, 25.

The anointing is the Holy Spirit, who leads God's people into all truth.

7. What makes someone an antichrist? v. 22

An antichrist is anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and Savior of the world.

8. What does denying the Son entail? v. 23

Denying the Son means denying the Father also. One cannot deny that Jesus is the Son of God and have God for his Father.

9. What results from letting the teaching we have heard from the beginning abide in us? vs. 24-25

If we keep to the gospel we originally received we will abide in God, that is, we will be alive with his life.

10. Who was trying to deceive John's readers? What was the nature of the deception they sought to spread? Re-read vs. 18-25.

The antichrists were the deceivers. They sought to convince Christians that Jesus was neither the Christ nor the Son of God.

11. John is confident that his readers will not be deceived. What is the basis of his confidence? v. 27

They have received the Holy Spirit, who will lead them into all truth and enable them to recognize Satan's attempts to deceive for what they are. See answers to study questions 5 and 6.

12. What must we do so that we will not be ashamed when Jesus comes again? vs. 28-29

We are to abide in Christ, that is, continue to believe in him as the Christ of God, God's Son who died for our sins. That truth is the very foundation of our faith (Matthew 16:16-18).

13. How can we know we are born of God? v. 29

“Everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him” (v.29). “Thus you will recognize them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20).

STUDY NOTES

1. The last hour.

When Christians think of the “last hour” they are likely to think of the time just before Christ’s Second Coming. But John said it was the last hour over 1900 years ago, and the Lord has not yet returned. Was John mistaken, or do we have a different idea of what the last hour means than the idea John had? Other scriptures bear on this question. By looking at them we can get a clear idea of what the last hour is.

In the so-called Olivet Discourse, recorded in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, our Lord speaks at length about the end of the age and his return. After describing the course of history after his resurrection, the great tribulation preceding his coming, and his return, he concludes with these words:

But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only....Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming....Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. *Matthew 24:36, 42, 44*

We cannot know the day of his appearing, but we are to be ready for it to be revealed at any time. In that respect it always has been the last hour. To be sure, earlier in the Olivet Discourse the Lord sketched the history of the spread of the gospel prior to the great tribulation and the appearance of the “abomination of desolation,” indicating that they are to precede his coming. But much of that history, perhaps all of it, had already taken place by the time John wrote. Certainly enough of what Christ predicted had already happened that John could say that it was the last hour.

Another interpretation of the last hour focuses on the distinction between “the present evil age” (Galatians 1:4) and “the age to come” (Matthew 12:32). The author of Hebrews tells us, “[Jesus] has appeared once for all *at the end of the ages* to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26, emphasis added). Ever since Christ came we have been living in the last hour of the present age; the age to come is imminent.⁶

6 Some Bible scholars adopt the so-called *preterist* interpretation of Matthew 24 and the parallel account in Luke 21. The preterist interpretation holds that *all* the events prophesied in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24) were fulfilled by 70 AD, when the Romans desecrated and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. A preterist finds it natural that John should say we are in the last hour, for he believes that everything that was to precede Christ’s coming has occurred. Other interpreters believe that some of those prophesied events are yet to occur before the Second Coming. For some of these interpreters the last hour refers to the time just before the so-called Rapture, an event that could happen any time and should not be confused with the Second Coming. According to them, the remaining prophecies in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 will be fulfilled after the Rapture but prior to the Second Coming. We will not go into the relative merits of these interpretive schemes.

2. The identity of Antichrist.

Protestant Christians have identified various persons and institutions as the Antichrist. The Reformers uniformly identified the Pope or the Papacy as the Antichrist. Some in later generations have identified Charlemagne, Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, Henry Kissinger, and Barack Obama, among others, as the Antichrist. All these attempts to identify Antichrist fail to take account of the following facts:

a. Only John uses the term antichrist; see 1 John 2:18, 2:22, and 4:3, and 2 John 7. He uses it to characterize those who once identified themselves as Christians but who later separated from the church and now deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. There have been and are today many who fit this description. There are many antichrists, not just one.

b. Bible references to a single individual who will arise at the end of time to persecute God's people and to set himself up as God describe him as the man of lawlessness and son of destruction (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, ESV), as the beast (Revelation 13:1-10), and as a little horn (Daniel 8:9-14). But this individual, while an antichrist, is never actually called the Antichrist.

To be sure, when John writes in 2:18, "you have heard that antichrist is coming," he implies that there is a particular individual that deserves that name; he may well have had in mind the man described in 2 Thessalonians, Revelation, and Daniel. There is nothing wrong, then, in using the term Antichrist to name the future man of sin. But John's warning concerns the many antichrists who try to deceive God's children; and such antichrists exist at present as well as in the past and the future. It's more important for us to recognize them than to puzzle over who the final Antichrist may be. We will know him when he appears. See study note 4, below.

3. Can a true, born again Christian, turn away from Christ?

The verses covered in this lesson shed light on the question posed above: Can a genuine Christian apostatize, that is, depart from the faith he or she once held? Evangelical Christians are divided over the issue. Lutherans, Wesleyans (Methodists, Nazarenes, holiness denominations), and Pentecostals answer Yes, while Baptists and Reformed believers (Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed) answer No. All recognize that some self-identified Christians walk away from the faith and repudiate Christ. Lutherans, Wesleyans, etc. maintain that (at least some) apostates were truly saved before they fell away. Baptists and Reformed Christians assert that so-called Christians who reject Christ were never really born again at all; that whatever kind of faith they had was not saving faith.

Both sides in this debate cite Scripture, but I believe that Scripture properly understood clearly supports the view that apostates never were born again; and this lesson's text is one of the scriptures that demonstrates that. Consider v. 19:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

The antichrists who forsook the church and the faith "were not of us." They certainly were members of the church, apparently members in good standing. They were not expelled from the church for obvious unchristian beliefs or behavior; rather, they walked away of their own free will. But they "were not of us." That phrase can only mean that they were not true Christians. They were not born again; their sins had not been forgiven.

Moreover, "if they had been of us they would have continued with us." If they had been born of God like John and his companions, they would have remained in the church and would hav

continued to profess the faith by which they were saved. Those who are genuine Christians—“of us”—will continue to confess Christ; they cannot apostatize.⁷

⁷ It would be a logical fallacy to turn this thought around, that is, to assert that if they remained in the church it would show that they were born of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that on the Day of Judgment many will remind Christ of the many great works they did in his name, only to be told by him that he *never* knew them (Matthew 7:21-23).

This lesson's text should warn us off from trying to discern who is a real Christian and who is not on the basis of subjective criteria. John has given us several criteria that serve as tests of spiritual life. If one walks in darkness, i.e., sin (1:6); if one says he has no sin (1:8); if one does not keep his commandments, in particular, the command to love one another (2:4); if one hates his brother (2:9); if one loves the world (2:15); if one forsakes the church and denies that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God—if any of these objective criteria are observed, then and only then can we consider a church member to be a false Christian.

John will reiterate these tests of life in similar words later in the letter.

4. Our anointing.

John says we have an anointing from the Holy One that gives us all knowledge of the truth (2:20 and 27). John's gospel tells us what Jesus said about this anointing:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth. *John 14:15-16*

The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. *John 14:26*

The Helper, or Anointing, is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, whom Jesus calls the Spirit of truth. Every born-again Christian has the Holy Spirit dwelling within (Romans 8:9). The Spirit reveals God's truth to us. When John says that the Spirit gives us "all knowledge," he is not referring to knowledge we get in school, like knowledge of history or mathematics, but to spiritual knowledge, as the Apostle Paul makes clear:

For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. *1 Corinthians 2:10-12.*

John's purpose in referring to the anointing of the Holy Spirit is to encourage his readers. Yes, there are deceivers and antichrists abroad, but those who truly know Christ and are indwelt by his Spirit will discern what is true and what is false. As Jesus said,

The sheep hear [the shepherd's] voice, and he calls his own sheep by name....the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. *John 10:3-5*

The shepherd is Christ; the sheep are Christ's own. They are not deceived by false shepherds or strangers, that is, by antichrists.

We should not let these assurances keep us from being alert. The Spirit teaches us the truth, but does it using Scripture. We are not to trust some inner feeling or intuition and imagine it is the voice of the Spirit if it is uninformed by God's Word. But if we make use of the means God has given for understanding his Word, we can be confident that God's Spirit will bring it to mind and apply it to any situation where we are confronted with teaching that claims to be true.

5. The truth.

Truth is a key concept in John's letters. John introduces it early in 1 John (1:7-8) and brings it up again and again (2:4, 2:21, 3:19, 4:6, and 5:6); he also twice mentions what is *true* (2:27, 5:20). The importance of truth in John's thought is complemented by his references to lies and liars (1:6, 1:10, 1:4, 2:22, and 5:10). An emphasis on truth is also found in 2 John, vs. 1, 2, 3, and 4, and 3 John, vs 3, 4, 8, and 12.

Truth is also a prominent concept in John's gospel, which was written earlier than his letters. John declared in the very beginning of his gospel that "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). In writing this he was faithful to the preaching of our Lord himself, who proclaimed to Pilate

For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. *John 18:37*

In his gospel John tells us much of what Jesus said about himself, for in speaking of himself Jesus was bearing witness to the truth:

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. *John 14:6*

A number of the verses mentioning truth in 1 John are references to the Spirit of truth—see study note 4, above. This way of describing the Holy Spirit should help us view the Spirit in the proper light. John does not speak of spiritual gifts, like healing and speaking in tongues, manifestations of the Spirit that fascinate many Christians. Rather, he emphasizes the Spirit's anointing us with knowledge of the truth so that we will not be deceived by antichrists. In the Olivet Discourse the Lord warned

See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Christ," and they will lead many astray. *Matthew 24:4*

The Apostle Paul likewise warns against false teachers who would lead us astray:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons. *1 Timothy 4:1*

Christians who can think of nothing but the miraculous gifts of the Spirit may be duped, at least at the outset, by deceivers who perform miraculous deeds. The Lord warned:

For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. *Matthew 24:24*

On the other hand, Christians who pray that the Spirit of truth will guide them into all truth will not be deceived by signs and wonders, verbal eloquence, or any other wiles of the antichrists who would seek to draw us away from Christ.

6. Abiding in Christ.

Like truth, *abiding* is a key concept in 1 John. He writes of abiding in God in 2:5, 2:27, and 3:6; of the message his readers heard from the beginning abiding in them in 2:24; of abiding in the Father and the Son in 2:24; of God's seed abiding in the Christian in 3:9; of those who do not love abiding in death in 3:15; of God's love abiding in us in 3:16; of those who keep God's commandments abiding in him and he in them in 3:24; of God abiding in those who love one another in 4:12. In 4:13-16 he uses the word five times. We cannot understand John unless we know what he means by *abiding*.

To *abide* means to dwell or live in a place; it also means to *continue* in a state. In the latter sense it is equivalent to *walking* in John's vocabulary. The equivalence of abiding and walking is clear in 2:6:

Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

No doubt John emphasizes abiding and walking in Christ because some who once named the name of Christ ceased to do so. John would not agree that "faith for a moment brings life for eternity" if that faith is *only* for a moment. Such faith is not true faith, for it does not result in abiding in Christ. The antichrists went out from among the true Christians and were now denying

Christ (vs. 18-1). John seeks to strengthen his readers so that they will recognize and reject the teaching and lifestyle of the antichrists. John writes what he does so that those who are in Christ will continue believing, obeying, loving, and walking in Christ. That is what abiding in Christ means.

LESSON 6: 1 JOHN 3: 1-10

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What shows the greatness of the Father's love for us? *v. 1*

2. The world does not know us—what does that mean?

3. The world does not know us—why not? *v. 1*

4. What great hope do we have for the future? *v. 2*

5. What results from our hope? *v. 3*

6. What is the essence or nature of sin? *v. 4*

7. Why did Christ come to earth? Confine your answer to vs. 5, 8.

8. Find a verse in chapter 1 that says essentially the same thing as 3:6

9. What is the deceit or lie that v. 7 warns against?

10. “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning.”
 - a. Why is this true?

 - b. What is this verse *not* saying? See 1:7-10

11. How can we know who is a child of God and who is a child of the devil? *vs. 8, 10*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What shows the greatness of the Father's love for us? v. 1

We are children of God.

2. The world does not know us—what does that mean?

It does not know that we are children of God. It did not know Christ either when he walked this earth. If it did not recognize the Son of God, who did many miraculous works and went about doing good, we should not expect it to recognize us.

3. The world does not know us—why not? v. 1

To the world we all too often look and act like everyone else. We are supposed to live lives of holiness and love that will make even the world glorify God (Matthew 5:13-16), but so often we don't seem any different to the world than unbelievers. And when we do live in radical obedience and love, as our Lord spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12), the result is often reviling and persecution.

4. What great hope do we have for the future? v. 3

We will see him as he is in glory and we will be as he is.

5. What results from our hope? v. 3

Everyone who has this hope purifies himself in this life, that is, he or she seeks to live a holy life as Christ did.

6. What is the essence or nature of sin? v. 4

Sin is lawlessness. It is breaking the commandments of God and of his Son.

7. Why did Christ come to earth? Confine your answer to these verses vs. 5, 8.

He appeared on earth to take away sins and destroy the works of the devil.

8. Find a verse in chapter 1 that says essentially the same thing as 3:6.

Compare 1:6 with 3:6:

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.
1:6

No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. 3:6

9. What is the deceit or lie that v. 7 warns against?

The deceiver would have us believe either that the one who practices righteousness is not really righteous or that those who practice wickedness are nevertheless righteous.

10. "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning."

a. Why is this true?

One born of God has God's seed abiding in him. See study note 4.

b. What is this verse not saying? See 1:7-10.

It is not saying that one born of God does not sin. Every Christian falls often into sin and needs to turn to Christ in repentance for forgiveness. The verse is saying that one born of God cannot practice sin as a way of life. One who has chosen a lifestyle of sin has no right to claim to be born again.

11. How can we know who is a child of God and who is a child of the devil? vs. 8, 10

The child of God follows a righteous lifestyle; the child of the devil follows a sinful lifestyle. The Lord Jesus himself said:

You will recognize them by their fruits....So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit....Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. *Matthew 7:16-18, 20*

STUDY NOTES

1. Children of the heavenly Father.

I suspect that many Christians would be surprised to learn that the Old Testament says little about God's people being his children. In Deuteronomy 14:1 we read, "You are the sons [ESV; other translations read *children*] of the LORD your God," and Hosea 1:10 says, "In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children [or *sons*] of the living God.'" Psalm 73:15, Psalm 82:6, Isaiah 1:2, and Isaiah 30:19 also speak of God's children.

Isaiah has perhaps the clearest references to God's people as his sons and daughters and to him as our Father:

I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth. *Isaiah 43:6*

For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us, you, O LORD, are our Father. *Isaiah 63:16*

But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter. *Isaiah 64:8*

To be sure, there are references to the people of Israel *collectively* as God's son (e.g., Jeremiah 31:20, Hosea 11:1), and several passages indirectly suggest that God thought of the people of Israel as his son (e.g., Deuteronomy 1:31 and 8:5), but direct Old Testament statements that the *individual* Israelite was a child of God are few and far between.

Similarly, few Old Testament passages refer to God as our father. Deuteronomy 32:6 reads, "Do you thus requite the LORD...? Is he not your father, who created you, who made you and established you?" Malachi 1:6 reads, "A son honors his father....If then I am a father, where is my honor?" And in Malachi 2:10 the prophet asks, "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?" One finds references to God as the father of Israel (e.g., Jeremiah 31:9), but one searches in vain for other references to God as the father of individual saints.⁸

Paul appears to quote from the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians 6:18:

I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

But those words are not found anywhere in the Old Testament. They may be a free paraphrase of a text that can't be identified.

To be sure, the Jews did think of God as their Father, but Jesus denies that they, who prized the Law and rejected him, were God's children.

The New Testament, on the other hand, frequently refers to God's people individually as children or sons of God and to God as our Father, nowhere as often as in 1 John and Romans 8. While God's people were saved by faith under the Old Covenant just as we are under the New Covenant, their understanding of their privileges and standing was not as full as ours.

Why is that? Two possible answers have been suggested:

a. Theologians often say that revelation is progressive, that is, that God's people were given greater and greater understanding of his truth as time moved on towards the first advent of Christ. For example, the fact that God is Triune (that is, that the one true God exists in three Persons) is only suggested here and there in the Old Testament. Similarly, the truth that believers will survive death and be resurrected was revealed in stages as the history of God's people unfolded.

⁸ At least one passage, Jeremiah 31:9, speaks of the Lord as the Father of Israel, but it refers to Israel collectively and not to individual Israelites. It is unclear whether Isaiah 63:16 and 64:8 refer to Israel collectively or to individual Israelites

So it was with the truth that God views his people as his children. Our privilege of addressing God as “Abba! Father” (Romans 8:15) is not one that even David, a man after God’s own heart, exercised as he poured his heart out to the Lord in the psalms. David was moved by the Holy Spirit as we are, but even so he does not address God as Father. Yet we are instructed to do so by the Lord Jesus himself in the Lord’s Prayer. God’s people were always his children, and God was always their Father, but they were not always aware of the fact.⁹

b. It may well be that Old Testament saints had more to do with the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, than they had to do with God the Father. It was the Son who made all things at the creation and gave life to all creatures (John 1:2-4). Abraham rejoiced that he saw the day of Jesus Christ (John 8:56). It was Jesus who saved Israel out of Egypt and later destroyed those who did not believe (Jude 5).¹⁰ If God’s people under the old covenant had more dealings with the Son than with the Father, it is not remarkable that God rarely called them children or identified himself as Father in that epoch.

We can’t be sure which of these two reasons, if either one, accounts for the fact that the Old Testament seldom calls God’s people his children or God their Father. But we live in a new era, and things are different now. As John says, how great is the love the Father has revealed to his people in the gospel age! He has revealed himself as a loving Father and calls us his children! How ungrateful we are if we do not praise him every day for giving us the right to become children of God (John 1:12). How dull or unbelieving we are if we do not bring our praise and concerns to him in prayer as a child brings his love and his requests to his earthly father.

2. “We shall be like him.”

We are now children of God, but that isn’t always easy to remember. As we look at ourselves and at each other we may not be very impressed with what we see. Few of us are physically impressive. Most of us have bodies that leave much to be desired, or so it seems to us. Some of us are chronically ill. All of us have bodies that age and grow infirm. And we all have death in our future unless the Lord returns first.

We are not impressive spiritually. We still struggle, too often unsuccessfully, against both sudden temptation and besetting sin. We still lack the faith, hope, and love we desire; we still know God’s truth only in part.

But we ought not to be depressed about our present state. We have the wonderful promise of John in v. 2: “when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” What does that mean?

It means, first, that we shall have resurrection bodies like his. We don’t know all or even much of what that entails, but we do know it will be a body fit for eternal life. No sickness or infirmity, no earthly limitations. It will be a glorious body, imperishable; it will be a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:35-49). Best of all, *we shall be like him*. As the Apostle Paul put it, we shall “bear the image of the man of heaven,” that is, our glorified Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:49).

9 Having said this, it’s important to note that God’s people who lived before Christ knew more than we think based solely on the statements of the Old Testament (see Hebrews 12). God spoke from time to time in visions to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob); what they were told they may have passed down orally to their descendants.

10 Jude 5 in some English translations reads *the Lord* or *God*. The ESV follows the more highly regarded Greek manuscripts and reads *Jesus*.

It means, secondly, that we will be sinless, body and soul. Our bodies will not be subject to the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, or the pride of life, and our bodies and souls will finally be rid of the old sinful nature. Christ never had that nature, and we will be like him.

This hope, John tells us, motivates us to live pure lives; as it were, to practice living the way we will naturally live in the world to come.

3. *Sin is lawlessness.*

When John states that sin is lawlessness, v. 4, he asserts that sin is defined objectively. People today, even Christian people, frequently fail to recognize this. Sin is often thought of as selfishness that disregards others or as the lack of love.

These definitions of sin, while true enough, are insufficient. They permit one to think that love between two consenting adults is enough reason to have sex, even if the two are unmarried, married to someone else, or are of the same sex. Lying to protect someone else is a loving act, not a sin. Euthanasia and assisted suicide are loving acts, not murder. On the other hand, failure to recycle waste and smoking tobacco (but not smoking marijuana!) are reprehensible sins. That is the way our world increasingly thinks.

On the other hand, when sin is recognized as lawlessness, a “want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (WSC, Question 14), then it is objectively plain what is and what is not sin. The law of God is an objective thing; it is found in the Bible. As the Shorter Catechism states in the answer to Question 3, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments tell us what duty God requires of man.

Scripture speaks of Antichrist as the man of lawlessness or the lawless one three times in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-11. Christians should have no trouble recognizing him when he appears. See also Lesson 5, study notes 1, 2, and 3.

4. *“No one born of God makes a practice of sinning.”*

Study questions 5 and 6 and study note 2 of Lesson 2 affirm the unhappy truth that born-again Christians still sin. Here in chapter 3 John states that no one born of God makes a practice of sinning. Is John contradicting himself?

No, John is not contradicting himself. There is a difference between habitual action and episodic action, a difference language itself accommodates. Many European languages have different verb forms for the two kinds of action. English does not, but we are able to make the distinction in other ways. We recognize the difference, for example, between the habitual action of the sentence, “I ate spaghetti as a child,” and the episodic action of, “I ate spaghetti last night.” When John wrote of sinning in 1:8-2:1 he was referring to sins we commit on occasions, maybe numerous occasions, not to habitual sins that characterize a sinful lifestyle. In 3:4-9 he writes of the sinful lifestyle, habitual sin.

But John says the reason the born-again Christian does not make a practice of sinning is that God’s seed abides in him and he CANNOT keep on sinning. Does that imply that the true Christian is incapable of episodic sinning? In the light of 1:8-2:1 we must answer No, it doesn’t imply that. What it means is well described by the Apostle Paul:

I am of the flesh, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. *Romans 7:14-20*

Twice in this passage Paul asserts, “It is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.” John and Paul are in agreement: the new creation in Christ Jesus cannot sin. But the old man, the flesh, is still with us and still commits sin. We still need forgiveness.

Paul makes it clear that “the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2). The Holy Spirit strengthens the new man so that it can and does put sin to death in us, though the old nature still sometimes gets its way:

I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. *Galatians 5:17*

The new man struggles with the flesh and will continue to do so until we are with Christ and are like him; see study note 2, above. But by the power of the Holy Spirit we are enabled more and more to put sin to death and live unto righteousness. Theologians call this process *sanctification*. The WSC, Question 35, describes the process of sanctification succinctly:

Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

No one who makes a practice of living sinfully has the right to consider himself or herself a Christian. The general tenor of the Christian’s life is and must be one of forsaking and resisting sin and living righteously in ever greater measure.

LESSON 7: 1 JOHN 3: 11-24

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Find a passage in Chapter 2 that says the same thing as 3:11-15.

2. We are to love our brothers, but Cain hated his brother enough to murder him.
 - a. Why did Cain hate his brother so? *v. 1*

 - b. Why should we not be surprised that the world hates us Christians? *v. 13*

3. What gives us confidence that we have passed out of death into life? *v. 14*

4. Find a passage in the Sermon on the Mount stating what the Lord regards as equivalent to murder, a statement even stronger than v. 15. See Matthew 5.

5. What is the ultimate measure of love? *v. 16*

6. What is another measure of love, less ultimate than that in v. 16? *v. 17*

7. Relate v. 19 to vs. 16-18.

8. Besides leading to peace of mind, why is it important to us to reassure our hearts before God? *vs. 19-22*

9. Verse 23 speaks of “his commandment,” that is, the one commandment that sums up all the others; see v. 22. What is that commandment?

10. What can we say about someone who keeps “his commandment” as stated in v. 23? *v. 24*

11. What further proof do we have that he abides in us? *v. 24*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Find a passage in Chapter 2 that says the same thing as 3:11-15.

Compare 3:11-15 with 2:7-10. These passages say the same thing in almost the same words:

For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another....We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. *3:11-15*

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning.....Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light. *2:7-10*

2. We are to love our brothers, but Cain hated his brother enough to murder him.

a. Why did Cain hate his brother so? v. 12

His brother's deeds were righteous and his own deeds were evil.

b. Why should we not be surprised that the world hates us Christians? v. 13

It hates us because our deeds are righteous and the world's way is evil. Things have not changed since the time of Cain and Abel.

3. What gives us confidence that we have passed out of death into life? v. 14

We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love our fellow Christians.

4. Find a passage in the Sermon on the Mount stating what the Lord regards as equivalent to murder, a statement even stronger than v. 15. See Matthew 5.

In Matthew 5:21-22 the Lord says that being angry enough with our brother to heap verbal abuse on him makes us liable to the hell of fire. That is even stronger than saying that murder makes us liable to hell.

5. What is the ultimate measure of love? v. 16

The ultimate measure of love is being willing to lay down one's life for others.

6. What is another measure of love, less ultimate than that in v. 16? v. 17

Helping a brother in need is another measure of love.

7. Relate v. 19 to vs. 16-18.

The *this* of v. 19 is loving in deed and truth. Deeds of mercy show that we are of the truth, and reassure our heart before God that we abide in him and he abides in us.

8. Besides leading to peace of mind, why is it important to us to reassure our hearts before God? vs. 19-22

We can then bring our requests to God with the assurance that he will grant what we ask for. We can pray in faith.

9. Verse 23 speaks of "his commandment," that is, the one commandment that sums up all the others (see v. 22). What is that commandment?

That we believe in the name of Jesus Christ and love one another.

10. What can we say about someone who keeps “his commandment” as stated in v. 23? v. 24

He abides in Christ and Christ abides in him.

11. What further proof do we have that he abides in us? v. 24

The Spirit God has given us assures us that we abide in Christ. This is one more way of knowing that we are his.

STUDY NOTES

1. The hatred of the world.

Who doesn't want to be liked? Who isn't shocked and confused upon discovering that he or she is disliked or even hated by someone? For several centuries most Americans thought well and spoke well of people who took their faith seriously even if they themselves were not religious. That era is rapidly passing away. To be sure, serious Christians who speak out and live their faith are not persecuted in America, but more and more they are openly disliked, belittled, mocked, scorned, and, yes, hated. Open contempt manifests itself publically in the media as well as privately. In some occupations Christians who stand openly for their faith are discriminated against. When Christians speak out in the public square or try to preserve biblical morality in public policy and law, they are maligned, marginalized, out-voted, or defeated in courts of law.

The source of this malice and opposition is hatred of Christ and of righteousness—Christ's righteousness, righteousness in general, and the righteousness of God's people.

John tells us we shouldn't be surprised at such hatred, v. 13. In his gospel he had already written

...people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

John 3:19-20

And he quoted the Lord Jesus when he spoke with the disciples in the upper room before he was betrayed:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: 'They hated me without a cause.' *John 15:18-25*

When we stand against abortion, gay marriage, or even against an unscriptural practice such as female clergy (an issue in which the world has no legitimate interest), we touch the world on the raw, and the world naturally lashes back in hatred towards those who would, by word or example, expose its sins. The world responds with hatred—equivalent to murder in God's sight, Matthew 5:21-22—just as Cain responded to Abel's righteousness with murder.

We are often dismayed and at a loss to comprehend such hatred, but our attitude towards it should be that which the Lord Jesus commended in the Sermon on the Mount.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. *Matthew 5:11-12*

2. The test of love.

The test of ultimate love is laying down one's life for another. Christ laid down his love for us when we were still sinners:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. *Romans 5:6-8*

...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. *Romans 5:10*

John recognizes that we are still human even though we are redeemed and born again. He doesn't mention laying down our lives for our enemies, though throughout the ages there have been Christians who have done just that. He does say that "we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."¹¹

Most Christians are not faced with a situation where the sacrifice of one's life is required either for enemies or for brothers and sisters, but John goes on to point out that there are lesser deeds than sacrificing our lives that we can perform. In particular, he says we should open our hearts (and our wallets) to a brother in need. All of us have many opportunities to share our material wealth with others. Our giving may be sacrificial even if we are not called on to sacrifice our lives.

But one thing our love must not be: it must not be just a matter of words (v. 18). James amplifies this point in this well-known passage on faith and works:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled" without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. *James 2:15-17*

3. Assurance when our heart condemns us.

Probably every Christian, especially as a new Christian, has been assaulted by doubts as to his or her salvation. John himself tells us how Satan, who used to accuse the saints day and night before God, was cast out of heaven (Revelation 12:7-10). The accuser of the brothers now makes war on them here on earth. One of his methods of attack is to accuse us to ourselves, making use of our own hearts. Satan has no trouble filling our hearts with knowledge of our sins—"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8).

Christians with tender consciences sometimes think they have sinned so much as Christians that God has turned away from them in disgust, that they have sinned away their salvation! Christ is the remedy for our sins, but sometimes it's hard not to think that we have forfeited our interest in Christ by our continued sinning. What is the remedy for the doubts that assail us?

There are several ways to shake off doubts as to our salvation and regain assurance that we are Christ's. John has filled his letter with tests of life; see 1:7, 2:3, 2:5-6, 2:10, 2:17, 2:23-24, 2:29, 3:10, and 3:14. Here at the end of chapter 3 he presents another one. "By *this* we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him."

What is the *this* to which he refers? It is what he has just been writing about, loving in deed and truth. John is saying in essence what he said in 2:10: "Whoever loves his brother abides in the light." He said it also in 3:14: "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers." Here he fleshes out that truth by telling us that love is a matter of deed and not of word. Do you love your fellow Christians? Not perfectly, of course; our love is never perfect; but do you love them some? Let that love, imperfect as it is, assure you that you are his. You wouldn't love them at all if you weren't a Christian, would you?

11 The Greek word here translated *brothers* covers both sexes when both are present. The ESV elsewhere translates it *brothers and sisters*. I am surprised it does not do so here.

Other New Testament writers also give assurance to the doubting Christian. The gospels give instances of the Lord Jesus assuring his own that they will never be rejected, e.g., John 6:37-39, assuring his own that he will keep them to the end. The Apostle Paul similarly has words of comfort and assurance for us, like these quoted earlier:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. *Romans 5:6-8*

...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. *Romans 5:10*

Romans 8 is another precious passage from Paul's pen for the Christian depressed by his or her sin. The anonymous Letter to the Hebrews likewise is full of assurance (e.g., Hebrews 6:17-20). See also 1 Peter 1:5 and Jude 24. More passages could be cited.

Most of these passages emphasize the faithfulness and power of God to keep his people. The assurance in 1 John 3:19-21 is of a different sort; it bids us look to our love for our brothers and sisters for evidence that we have passed from death to life.

We have, then, the witness of the Scripture, the witness of the Spirit within that we are God's children (Romans 8:14-16), and the witness of our deeds that we remain God's in spite of the testimony of our conscience against us.

4. The supreme commandment.

John wrote earlier of the necessity of keeping God's commandments (2:3-4 and 2:7-8). He didn't come out directly and say what God commanded, but in 2:9-11 he leaves no doubt that the "old commandment that you had from the beginning," 2:7, is the command to love one another. Still, it's not until 3:23-24 that he states explicitly God's commandment: "And this is his commandment that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another."

The commandment is actually two commandments. The first commandment is to believe in the name of Jesus the Son of God. John was in the upper room the night Jesus was betrayed when he heard Jesus command his disciples, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). Belief in Jesus is *commanded*; it is a sin not to believe in him as the Christ, the Son of God. Those who do not believe are condemned for their unbelief as well as for their other sins:

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. *John 3:18*

The second commandment is the commandment to love one another. No other New Testament author writes so much of loving one another as John. Just as he heard the Lord command his followers to believe in his name, so he heard him command them to love the brothers:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. *John 15:12*

The Lord's love and his commandment to love one another impressed John deeply. John was "the disciple Jesus loved" (John 13:23). Later John writes, "We love because he first loved us" (4:19). He had been loved by Christ, and he loved Christ and his brothers and sisters in Christ in return.

If we feel we lack love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, perhaps it's because we don't grasp and feel how great is his love for us. In chapter 4 John will expound on God's love. Read and re-read such passages and meditate on them. Ask the Holy Spirit to shed abroad God's love in your heart (Romans 5:5). If that doesn't lead to increased love for our fellow Christians, we need to take 3:14-15 as a solemn warning:

We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.

LESSON 8: 1 JOHN 4: 1-6

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What challenge did John's readers face? *v. 1*
2. What is the test of a prophet or of the spirit speaking through him? *vs. 2-3*
3. What spirit denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? *v. 3*
4. John tells his readers that they have already overcome the false prophets. What made them overcomers? *v. 4*
5. Who is in us? Who is in the world? *v. 4*
6. Where do false prophets come from? What kind of message do they bring? *v. 5*
7. What is the world's reaction to false prophets? Why do they react that way? *v. 5*
8. Who is the "we" of verse 6?
9. Who receives the message of John and the other apostles? Who does not receive it? *v. 6*
10. What is the "this" of v. 6?

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What challenge did John's readers face? v. 1

Many false prophets had gone out into the world. How were John's readers to know which spirits were of God and which were false?

2. What is the test of a prophet or of the spirit speaking through him? vs. 2-3

A spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God; a spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.

3. What spirit denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? v. 3

The spirit of Antichrist.

4. John tells his readers that they have already overcome the false prophets. What made them overcomers? v. 4

He who was in them was greater than he who was in the world.

5. Who is in us? Who is in the world? v. 4

The Holy Spirit is in us. The spirit of Antichrist is in the world.

6. Where do false prophets come from? What kind of message do they bring? v. 5

False prophets come from the world, not from God. They speak a message of this world.

7. What is the world's reaction to false prophets? Why do they react that way? v. 5

The world listens to them, that is, accepts their message. It does so because the false prophets speak its language and tell the world what it is accustomed to hear and wants to hear.

8. Who is the "we" of verse 6?

The "we" is the same as the "us" of 2:19, i.e., John and his companions. See the answer to study question 4 in Lesson 5.

9. Who receives the message of John and the other apostles? Who does not receive it? v. 6

Those who know God receive John's message. Those who are not from God do not receive his message.

10. What is the "this" of verse 6?

It would be the test of v. 2: Does the spirit animating the prophet confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh or does it not?

STUDY NOTES

1. Once more: the spirit of the Antichrist.

The verses covered in this lesson reprise 2:18-24. Again John writes of the Antichrist, or more accurately, of the spirit of Antichrist. Again he warns against false prophets moved by the spirit of Antichrist, false prophets who themselves are antichrists, men who deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God come in the flesh.

He again expresses confidence that God's people will overcome these false prophets by recognizing and rejecting them and their teaching. They are able to overcome because they have been anointed with the Holy Spirit, the Holy One (2:20). He is in them and he is greater than the spirit of Antichrist that is in the world.

Because they are from God and have the Spirit of God within them, they will heed the Spirit speaking the truth through John and his companions and turn away from the spirit of error speaking through the false prophets. What they heard from the beginning will abide in them, and they will abide in the Father and the Son.

2. Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

Belief that the material world, including human flesh, is evil has arisen from time to time in Christian history. Certainly the New Testament speaks of the sinfulness of the flesh (Greek *sarx*). In the New Testament *sarx* includes not only our bodies, but also our natural emotions, reasoning, and will. We know from our own experience that these are sources of sinful behavior. We are sinful people in a sinful world, and the New Testament usually has our fallen, sinful human nature in mind when it uses the word *sarx*.

Yet flesh is not *inherently* sinful: Adam and Eve were flesh and yet sinless before the fall. It is fallen human nature, not human nature in its pre-Fall, essential state, which is sinful. Christians are prone to overlook this fact. In the early days of the Christian church some Christians were troubled by the implication of the Incarnation. If Jesus became a true man, did he take sinful flesh upon himself? Surely not! But if *sarx* is sinful, could the sinless Son of God have really become flesh?

Some who identified as Christians solved this quandary by claiming that the Son of God only seemed to be a man. He never really became flesh, he only appeared in human form. This seems to have been the claim of the false prophets animated by the spirit of Antichrist.

This theory, later called *docetism* (from a Greek word meaning to appear or seem), deceived enough members of the church that John was obliged to confront it in this letter. He began his defense of the true humanity of Jesus Christ in the first verse of this letter:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands—concerning the word of life....

John knew that Jesus was a real, flesh-and-blood human being, for he had heard him, seen him, looked upon him and touched him. He was present when the resurrected Christ invited doubting Thomas to put his finger in the wounds in his hands and to put his hand in his wounded side (John 20:27). John was able to confirm by his own experience what he so famously affirmed in John 1:14: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father full of grace and truth.”

Belief in the true humanity of Jesus Christ is as important as belief in his divinity for our salvation. If Jesus had not been a real human being, flesh as well as spirit, he could not have given

his life as a proper ransom for us who are flesh as well as spirit. A human life for human lives.¹² Those who think Jesus was God only, not man, have no true human to die for their human sins. God is a spirit (John 4:24). A pure spirit cannot die on a cross.

Within a generation after John's death the heresy of docetism had taken root in the greater Christian community and did not die out completely for several hundred years. Were John's warnings ineffective? No; we can be sure they were effective for those who knew God. But the church has always had those who "were not of us; for it they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (2:19).

3. "he who is in you" and "he who is in the world."

John assures his readers that they have already overcome the false prophets who denied that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh, because he who was in them is greater than he who is in the world. The one who was in them is the Holy Spirit. John referred to the Holy Spirit indirectly in 2:20 when he told his readers they had been anointed by the Holy One. In 4:6 he refers to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth.

In the upper room, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus promised to send his disciples the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-17). Here in his first letter John tells his readers that the Spirit of truth is not just for the original twelve disciples, but for all born-again Christians. The Apostle Paul tells us the same:

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him....If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. *Romans 8:9, 11*

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. *Ephesians 1:13*

The Holy Spirit reveals to Christians who is a true prophet or preacher, that is, one who speaks the truth, and who is a false prophet or preacher, one who speaks error. It is the Spirit who keeps us from believing the lie.

Those who are of the world, however, believe the errors and lies that false prophets speak, for the spirit that dwells in them is the spirit of error. We need to remember, hard as it may be to grasp fully, that unbelievers are not merely in error, but are indwelt by Satan himself, the father of lies. The lies of Satan seem perfectly reasonable to them, for the spirit of Antichrist dwells in them. As John says later, "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (5:19).

This is not to say that all unbelievers are *possessed* by the devil, but it is to say that Satan is ever close to them, snatching away the truth when they hear it (Matthew 13:19), filling their thoughts with error and lies, and tempting them to do evil. And so it was with us, though we didn't know it until God in his mercy and grace "delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13).

12 He also had to be divine. It is questionable to me whether one who was only a man could ransom more than one other human being by his death—one man for one man. Only an infinite being could make atonement for the entire human race. Moreover, only an infinite being could satisfy God's righteous judgment after only three days and nights in the grave. One who was only man, even a sinless man, would have to remain under the power of death forever to ransom us from eternal death.

4. The world.

John makes a strong contrast between the people of God and the world. What does he mean by the *world*?

John's uses the term *world* to mean two things. In the first place, the world is the majority of humanity that does not know God. It is comprised of a multitude of individuals who neither know nor care about the one true God. Some may be religious, others irreligious, but neither sort knows the grace of God in Jesus Christ. This multitude of lost individuals is what John 3:16 refers to when it declares, "God so loved the world."

Secondly, John uses *world* to refer to the sinful cultural milieu we all live in. This is the world that we are not to love:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. *1 John 2:15-17*

John uses *world* in both senses in 4:5:

They are from the world [cultural milieu]; therefore they speak from the world [cultural milieu], and the world [lost humanity] hears them.

We are to love the world of lost souls as God loves them. We are not to love the cultural milieu of sinful desires, customs, and activities. How often we get things turned completely around, caring not for those around us who are perishing in the sins, and falling prey to the desires of the flesh, the desire of the eyes and pride in possessions!

LESSON 9: 1 JOHN 4: 7-12

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the source of love? *v. 7*
2. What is true of those who love? What is true of those who do not love? *vs. 7-8*
3. What proof do we have that “God is love”? *v. 9*
4. Who took the initiative in loving? *v. 10*
5. What is our response to be to God’s love? *v. 11*
6. In v. 11 John doesn’t tell us to love God in return for his love, but rather to love one another? Why doesn’t he tell us to love God? *v. 12*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the source of love? v. 7

Love is from God.

2. What is true of those who love? What is true of those who do not love? vs. 7-8

Those who love are born of God and know him. Those who do not love do not know God.

3. What proof do we have that “God is love”? v. 9

He sent his only Son into the world to suffer and die for their sins.

4. Who took the initiative in loving? v. 10

God. It is not that we loved him and sought him. He loved us first and saved us while we were still his enemies (Romans 5:8-10).

5. What is our response to be to God’s love? v. 11

We ought to love one another.

6. In v. 11 John doesn’t tell us to love God in return for his love, but rather to love one another? Why doesn’t he tell us to love God? v. 12

No one has ever seen God. If we don’t love those we have seen, how can we love those we have not seen?

STUDY NOTES

1. For the third time, Love one another!

Some affirm that repetition is the key to learning. John must have thought so, because in 4:7-21, for the third time, John urges his readers to love one another. He first emphasized the necessity of loving our brothers and sisters in 2:7-11. He stressed brotherly love again in 3:11-18. Now he repeats the commandment to love one another in 4:7-21. Clearly, the command to love one another is one that bears repeating lest we forget it!

The importance of loving one another is what gives John urgency. Those who love one another are born of God, for God is love: the child resembles the parent. On the other hand, those who do not love, but hate their erstwhile brothers and sisters, do not know God. Whether we love one another or not is a matter of heaven or hell.

John is careful not to say that our love for others makes us children of God. His love was first; because of that love he saved us. Our love is a response to his love; his love is not a response to our love. We love because we have been born again, not in order to give birth to ourselves as children of God. Verses 10-11 makes this clear:

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Our love is a necessary fruit of salvation. We can look into our hearts and lives and tell by our love that we are God's; it is another of the tests of life in Christ that John provides in this letter. It is one way to know if we are abiding in him.¹³

Our love is not perfect, neither our love for each other nor our love for God. If it were perfect, John would not have to urge it on us with repeated admonitions as he does. Let us not grow weary of John's repetition. None of us has yet attained to perfect love.

13 Sensitive Christians may wonder if they love their brothers and sisters enough to assure themselves that they abide in Christ. See Lesson 7, study note 3 for a discussion of this issue.

LESSON 10: 1 JOHN 4: 13-21

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Find a verse in the previous section (3:11-24) that says the same thing as 4:13.
2. What truth is taught both in v. 14 and in chapter 1?
3. Find a verse in the previous lesson (4:1-6) that is reaffirmed by v. 15.
4. Because we have the Spirit, v. 13, and because we confess Jesus Christ to be the Son of God, v. 15, we have come to know and believe something—what is it? *v. 16*
5. What does this knowledge and belief make perfect in us? What confidence does it give us? *v. 17*
6. John says in v. 17 that perfect love is related to confidence on the Day of Judgment. How does v. 18 make that relationship more clear?
7. What is the source or ground of our love? *v. 19*
8. Find verses in the previous section, 3:11-24, that say the same thing as 4:20-21.

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Find a verse in the previous section (3:11-24) that says the same thing as 4:13.

Compare v. 13 with 3:24.

2. What truth is taught both in v. 14 and in chapter 1?

The Father sent his Son Jesus Christ to earth as a man to be the Savior of the world.

3. Find a verse in the previous lesson (4:1-6) that is reaffirmed by v. 15.

Compare v.15 with 4:2.

4. Because we have the Spirit, v. 13, and because we confess Jesus Christ to be the Son of God, v. 15, we have come to know and believe something—what is it? v. 16

We know and believe how great God's love for us is.

5. What does this knowledge and belief make perfect in us? What confidence does it give us? v. 17

It perfects our love, as does keeping his word (2:5). That love gives us confidence to face the Day of Judgment unafraid.

6. John says in v. 17 that perfect love is related to confidence on the Day of Judgment. How does v. 18 make that relationship more clear?

Confidence on the Day of Judgment means we face it without fear of punishment. Perfect love drives out fear. Many know from sad experience the fear that people we love may leave us because their love will not last. But God's love for us is perfect; he will never forsake or cast away those he loves. His perfect love makes it possible for us to love with an increasing, ever more perfect love.

7 What is the source or ground of our love? v. 19

We love because he first loved us. If he had not loved us, we would love neither God nor our brothers and sisters.

8. Find verses in the previous section, 3:10-24, that say the same thing as vs. 20-21.

Compare vs. 20-21 with 3:10 and 15; also 2:9-11.

STUDY NOTES

1. Fear of the Day of Judgment.

Many Christians, perhaps all Christians at some time in their life, are afraid they will be ashamed at the coming of Christ to judge the world. It is not just unbelievers who will appear at his judgment seat; believers too will stand before him, to be judged by their works:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

2 Corinthians 5:10

To be sure, the believer's judgment will determine his reward, not whether he is bound for heaven or hell. The life and death of Jesus Christ redeemed us from the guilt of our sins and the punishment that our sin warranted. Nevertheless, our judgment could lead to loss:

each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. *1 Corinthians 3:13-15*

What thoughtful, introspective Christian has not been afraid that he will "be saved, but only as through fire"? ¹⁴

How to rid one's self of such fear and anxiety? John gives us the remedy: as our love is perfected, our fear and anxiety will diminish. If our love could be perfected, our apprehensions would vanish entirely. And how is love perfected? John says that it is perfected as we come to know and believe the love God has for us. If we think of Christ as a stern judge, barely forgiving the redeemed when they stand before his judgment seat, we will continue to fear. But if we recognize that the One who loved us enough to die for us is ready to receive us into glory with as much love as he showed in dying for us, we will lose our fears. Remember, our Judge is also our Advocate (2:1).

Arise, my soul, arise, shake off your guilty fears;
The bleeding sacrifice in my behalf appears:
Before the throne my Surety stands,
Before the throne my Surety stands,
My name is written on his hands.
My God is reconciled; his pard'ning voice I hear;
He owns me for his child, I can no longer fear;
With confidence I now draw nigh,
With confidence I know draw nigh,
And "Father, Abba, Father!" cry.

¹⁴ Roman Catholics are afraid of more than loss of reward; they fear actual punishment in purgatory. They don't believe purgatory will last forever, but they believe it will be a punishment that purges away the remnants of sin, presumably culminating in the perfect love John extols. One is reminded of the saying, "The beatings will continue till morale improves."

LESSON 11: 1 JOHN 5: 1-12

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. He who confesses Christ has the Father also, 2:23, and the Father abides in him (4: 15). What else is true of him who believes Jesus is the Christ? *v. 1*
2. We may wonder if we really love our brothers and sisters as we are commanded to do. How may we know that we love the children of God? *v. 2*
3. How can we know if we really love God? *v. 3*
4. If no one can keep the law of God perfectly, how can John say that God's commandments are not burdensome? *v. 3*
5. The world is formidable and is a perennial source of temptation. How can we overcome it? *vs. 4-5*
6. What does it mean that Jesus came by water and blood (v. 6)? You may need to consult a commentary to answer this.
7. How do the Spirit, the water, and the blood testify to Jesus Christ (vs. 7-9)? Again, you may want to consult a commentary.
8. What does v. 10 mean?
9. What is the testimony that God himself has borne concerning his Son? *vs. 11-12*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. He who confesses Christ has the Father also, 2:23, and the Father abides in him (4:15). What else is true of him who believes Jesus is the Christ? v. 1

He has been born of God.

2. We may wonder if we really love our brothers and sisters as we are commanded to do. How may we know that we love the children of God? v. 2

If we love God and keep his commandments we will love them, for Jesus said that all the commandments are wrapped up in the command to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40, Mark 12:29-31).

3. How can we know if we really love God? v. 3

We really love God if we keep his commandments.

4. If no one can keep the law of God perfectly, how can John say that God's commandments are not burdensome? v. 3

The Apostle Peter stated that the Law of Moses was a burden too heavy for the Jews to bear (Acts 15:10). The very commandments stir up our sinful nature (Romans 7:7-13). But the Christian is not under law but under grace, and that means sin will have no more dominion over us (Romans 8:11-14). Paradoxically, we can obey the Law because we are not under law. We have the Holy Spirit to lead us: "if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law" (Galatians 5:18). By the Holy Spirit, we are able to put to death the deeds of the body (Romans 8:13).

5. The world is formidable and is a perennial source of temptation. How can we overcome it? vs. 4-5

Our faith in Jesus has brought us new life, and as new creatures born of God we can overcome the world.

6. What does it mean that Jesus came by water and blood, v. 6? You may need to consult a commentary to answer this.

Briefly, when Jesus was born of Mary he came by water and blood. Water and blood are present during the process of birth. When he was crucified his death was accompanied by the shedding of water and blood. See study note 3 for an expanded discussion.

7. How do the Spirit, the water, and the blood testify to Jesus Christ, vs. 7-9? Again, you may want to consult a commentary.

a. The water and blood testify to Jesus' human nature. He was a true human being come in the flesh, a point John has already emphasized several times. Those who went out from John's company denied that Jesus had come in the flesh.

b. The water and blood also testify to his coming as our Redeemer, the One who gave his life a ransom for many. When Jesus was on the cross a Roman soldier pierced his side with a spear, and water and blood poured out. He really shed his blood and died on the cross, something a pure spirit could not do.

c. Jesus promised that the Father would give the Spirit to his disciples and that the Spirit would testify to him (John 14:15-17, 16: 7-11).

See study note 3 for an expanded discussion.

8. What does v. 10 mean?

One who believes in Jesus Christ has the Holy Spirit dwelling within. The Spirit within confirms the witness of the water and the blood. The Spirit does not dwell with unbelievers although he does witness to the world. Those who deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, are liars, for they reject the testimony of the Spirit. To reject that testimony is to make God a liar, for the Holy Spirit is God.

9. What is the testimony that God himself has borne concerning his Son? vs. 11-12

The message to which God bears testimony is this: God has given eternal life to the world in the person of Jesus Christ his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son does not have life.

STUDY NOTES

1. Love and the commandments.

Once more John equates love of God with keeping his commandments. This has been discussed in Lesson 2, study note 1 and Lesson 3, study note 2; I recommend reading them again.

2. Faith is the victory that overcomes the world.

Well-meaning friends sometimes try to cheer up the discouraged or afflicted by telling them to have faith. Such encouragement rarely helps the sufferer: it's too vague and unfocused. Faith in what? Faith without an object? Perhaps one's friends mean faith that things will get better if one just doesn't give up and preserves a positive attitude. But that kind of faith is hard to drum up and maintain without any reason for hope. Such faith has no object to hold on to.

Christian faith has an object. Christians often get discouraged by their failure to overcome the sin that still remains within and the temptations of the world without. John tells us that we overcome the world by our faith. His words should provide real encouragement to us, for our faith is not some vague, unfocused faith. Our faith is trust in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He conquered sin, rose from the dead, and is now our Advocate at God's right hand (2:1). By faith we received the Holy Spirit when we believed. In his power we can overcome the world and its temptations; he will give us victory. Our faith is well-founded.

3. Jesus came by water and blood. The testimony of the Spirit, the water, and the blood.

Many commentators agree with the gist of the answers to study questions 6 and 7. Water and blood are released during the process of normal birth. Several times earlier in the letter John emphasized the importance of believing that Jesus came as a real, flesh-and-blood human being; see Lesson 8, study note 2. His crucifixion also was accompanied by the outpouring of water and blood from his pierced side, something mentioned only by John in his gospel (John 19:34-35).

John asserts that the water and blood *testify* to Jesus coming in the flesh. The Holy Spirit applies that testimony to the hearts of those ordained to eternal life. John wrote about the work of the Spirit in his gospel. The night he was crucified Jesus said to his disciples in the upper room

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. *John 14:26*

He went on to say

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment because the ruler of this world is judged. *John 16:7-11*

4. Verses 7-8: the King James Version and modern translations.

Verses 7-8 in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible are different from the same text in later translations, including the English Standard Version (ESV) on which this study guide is based. Verses 7-8 in the KJV read as follows:

For there are [three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are] three that bear witness [in earth], the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.

The bracketed words do not appear in later translations. For example, the ESV reads:

For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree.

Other modern translations (e.g., the NIV and NASB) are much like the ESV. They do not contain the bracketed phrase above, “in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.”

Why do the KJV differ from later translations?¹⁵ The KJV was translated at a time when the oldest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament either had not been discovered or were not given sufficient weight because they differed from the majority of manuscripts.¹⁶ The majority of manuscripts consulted by the KJV translators date from centuries later—in some cases over a thousand years later—than the smaller number of ancient manuscripts. It isn’t surprising that few of the older manuscripts survived. Manuscripts, like other items that are handled and used, wear out, are damaged, or just get lost with the passage of time.

The extra words in the KJV are found in only four late Greek manuscripts; in two of them they are found written in the margin, not in the text itself. They are present in late manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate translation, but not in the original Vulgate as translated by St. Jerome from the Greek. In the opinion of the great majority of Bible scholars, including almost all evangelical scholars, the extra words in the KJV cannot be considered original. Scholarly opinion leans to the view that they were originally a *gloss*, an explanatory comment placed in the margin, then mistakenly incorporated into the text by a later copyist.

15 One new translation, The New King James Version (NKJV), follows the KJV. That isn’t surprising since the NKJV is avowedly based, not on the oldest manuscripts, but on the Greek text followed by the King James translators.

16 The work of translation was begun in 1604 and finished in 1611.

LESSON 12: 1 JOHN 5: 13-21

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why did John write this letter? *v. 13; see also 1:3-4.*
2. What confidence do they have who have eternal life? *vs. 14-15*
3. John said in vs. 14-15, “if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.” Verse 16 tells us one thing we can ask in confidence. What is it?
4. What is one thing we *cannot* pray for in confidence? *v. 16*
5. Research “sin that leads to death” and summarize what you find.
6. Why is it that one born of God does not keep on sinning? *v. 18; see also 3:9*
7. Contrast the end of v. 18 with v. 19.
8. Who is “him who is true” in v. 20?
9. Why is it important to know the *true* God? *v. 20*
10. How does the exhortation in v. 21 flow from v. 20?

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why did John write this letter? v. 13; see also 1:3-4

He wrote it so that believers might know they have eternal life.

2. What confidence do they have who have eternal life? vs. 14-15

If we ask him for anything in accordance with his will he will do it.

3. John said in vs. 14-15, “if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.” Verse 16 tells us one thing we can ask in confidence. What is it?

We can ask God to reclaim a sinning brother from the path that leads to death.

4. What is one thing we cannot pray for in confidence? v. 16

We cannot pray for the recovery of someone who has sinned a sin that leads to death.

5. Research “sin that leads to death” and summarize what you find.

Commentators propose diverse interpretations of 1 John 5:16-17. The major interpretations are: (a) John is writing of premature physical death; (b) believers can backslide and turn to a life of habitual sin, which leads to the loss of salvation and spiritual death; (c) John has in mind the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31, Mark 3:28-30); (d) the sin that leads to death is apostasy, denying that Jesus Christ the Son of God has come the flesh after professing Christ and being a member of the Christian community. Interpretations (a) and (b) presume that the brother is a true brother, a born-again Christian. Interpretations (c) and (d) presume that the “brother” never was born of God. Study note 2 examines these interpretations more fully.

6. Why is it that one born of God does not keep on sinning? v. 18; see also 3:9

God protects him. God’s seed remains within him and he is born of God.

7. Contrast the end of v. 18 with v. 19.

Satan, the evil one, does not touch the believer, who is protected by God, but the world is helpless before the evil one and lies in his power.

8. Who is “him who is true” in v. 20?

The first use of the phrase refers to God the Father; the second use of the phrase refers to his Son, Jesus Christ. Recall that John calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of truth (4:5). All three Persons of the Trinity are one true God.

9. Why is it important to know the true God? v. 20

To know him is life eternal. Error and falsehood lead to death.

10. How does the exhortation in v. 21 flow from v. 20?

Idols are false gods, the very opposite of the true God. See study note 3.

STUDY NOTES

1. Ask and receive.

Jesus promised his disciples that if they asked him for anything he would do it.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? *Matthew 7:7-11*. See also Luke 11:9-13

Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. *John 14:13-14*

Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. *John 16:23*

Here in 1 John 5:14-15 John repeats the promise.

There are understood, unstated conditions attached to the gifts; he will do it so that his name is glorified and that our joy may be full. If we ask for something that would not be good for us, something that would not lead to his being glorified or to our joy being full, he will not grant our request. And if we are contemplating sin at the time we pray he will not hear us: "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18).

Finally, we must pray believing that God will answer our prayers. On a number of occasions Jesus healed the afflicted because they had faith in him; on other occasions he was unable to heal because of unbelief (Matthew 8:5-10, 9:20-22, 13:25, 15:21-28, and 19:14-20, Mark 5:35-36, 6:4-6, and 10:46-52, Luke 17:11-19, John 4:46-54).

James writes of the importance of faith in prayer:

But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. *James 1:6-8*

2. Sin unto death.

The answer to study question 5 listed four interpretations of "sin unto death."

a. *Premature physical death.* The view that John is writing of premature physical death is supported by scripture passages indicating that God brings sickness and death on some Christians because of their sin. Paul speaks of such sin in 1 Corinthians 11:29-30:

For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill and some have died.

The particular sin Paul was condemning was partaking unworthily of the Lord's Supper, but the principle is of general application, as suggested by James:

The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. *James 5:15-16*

James, like Paul, indicates that sin may be the cause of illness, illness from which one needs to be saved, presumably saved from death.

b. *Backsliding leading to the loss of salvation and eternal death.* The idea that a born-again Christian can lose his salvation by returning to a sinful life is a part of the Arminian understanding of salvation and the Christian life. Arminians point to Bible passages like these:

And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. *Matthew 24:12-13*

I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

1 Corinthians 10:1-5

...holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith.

1 Timothy 1:19

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised....”but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.” But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. *Hebrews 10:36, 38-39*

Most Anglicans, conservative Methodists, Nazarenes, holiness churches, and Pentecostal churches teach this.

Roman Catholic theology is similar to the Arminian view. It makes a distinction between *mortal sins* and *venial sins*. Mortal sins are serious sins which forfeit salvation and eternal life; venial sins are less serious sins that entail punishment in purgatory but do not expose one to eternal death. A Roman Catholic can confess his mortal sins to a priest, who absolves them in the name of Christ and prescribes a suitable penance.

Baptists and Presbyterians reject this view. The idea that a true Christian can sin his way out of eternal life runs head-on into what John himself said earlier:

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. *3:9*.

John indicates that a true believer cannot return to a sinful lifestyle. Review Lesson 3 study note 3 and Lesson 5 study note 3, where this issue is discussed at length.

c. *The unpardonable sin: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.* Before taking up blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as the sin that leads to death we need to consider whether there is a particular sin that leads to death or whether it is any sin of exceptional severity and duration.

The Greek language had no indefinite article, no *a* or *an*. The translator has to supply an indefinite article where he judges it is called for. The phrases “sin not leading to death” and “sin unto death” and variations of them found in vs. 16-17 of the ESV and other modern translations reflect the view that a certain particular sin is not in view. The KJV, on the other hand, supplies the indefinite article; it reads “a sin which is not unto death,” and “a sin unto death.” Presumably the KJV translators had a particular sin in mind. They may have been thinking of the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31), or it could have been apostasy.

There is no way to know for sure whether John was thinking of a particular sin that leads to death or sin in general, so there is no way to know if he had in mind blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as the sin that leads to death.¹⁷

Satan afflicts some Christians by telling them they have committed the unpardonable sin. If you are troubled by these thoughts, rest assured that the very fact they upset you indicates you have not committed the unpardonable sin. In 1:7-9 John assures us, “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” and in 5:18 we read that Jesus (“he who was born of God”) protects God’s children from being touched by the evil one.

It seems clear that only unbelievers who reject the testimony of the Spirit and see it as coming from the evil one are guilty of this sin. They are those who refuse to repent and believe even after they have been convicted by the Spirit.

d. *Apostasy*. John uses harsh words to describe those who departed from the Christian fellowship and then denied that Jesus is the Christ: he calls them *antichrists* (2:18-23). The Book of Hebrews says it is impossible to renew such apostates to repentance:

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. *Hebrews 6:4-6*.

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? *Hebrews 10:26-29*

Some will wonder, do these words apply to born-again Christians? The description of the apostate in chapters 6 and 12 of Hebrews certainly could be applied to true believers. They have been enlightened, they have tasted of the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted of the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and been sanctified by the blood of the covenant. Can one who is once a genuine Christian apostatize? We sadly see some we thought to be real Christians turn their backs on the faith they once professed. Were they once born-again?

We have already seen in John’s writings that the answer is No. Apostasy is itself proof that, no matter how much they resembled the genuine article, the apostate never was “of us” (2:19). The Lord himself told us that there would be false Christians mixed in with true believers. They might do mighty works in his name—Judas cast out demons—but Christ will tell them on the Day of Judgment, “I never knew you” (Matthew 7:23). They might look so much like Christians before forsaking the faith that the angels would be unable to identify them as counterfeit, as the Lord said in the parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30).

In this writer’s opinion, interpretations *a* and *d* are both possible understandings of “sin unto death.” It may be grievous sin that God will visit with illness and even death if it is persisted in; it may be the apostasy of those who look like brothers to us (and even the angels!) before they leave the faith. We may pray for the brother who seems to be following a sinful path that must be

17 It may be significant that John does not record the Lord’s words found in Matthew 12:31 and Mark 3:28-30 about the unpardonable sin; but then again, neither does Luke.

forsaken in hope that he will repent and seek forgiveness before the Lord afflicts him with sickness or worse. We have no call to pray for an apostate who has publically turned his back on Christ. John doesn't forbid such prayers, and we may pray for those who have left the church in the hope that we are wrong about them, but it will be difficult to pray in faith.

3. Keep yourself from idols.

John's final charge, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols," may seem unnecessary in America in the present day. To be sure, a minuscule number of Hindus and Buddhists, mostly in immigrant communities, have idols in their places of worship, but over 99% of Americans are in no danger of bowing to images of false gods. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians venerate statues and icons but hotly deny they worship them. Judge for yourself.

But other forms of idolatry exist, kinds of idolatry to which we are all too prone. Paul says in Colossians 3:5 that covetousness is idolatry. Money serves as an idol for many. They love it and devote their energies to obtaining it.

Closely related to love of money is love of material possessions. Some men make their classic car (or boat, or vacation home . . . fill in the blank) their idol, spending all their available time and money on it, loving and cherishing it far more than the God who made them. Some people idolize their favorite sports team.¹⁸

Another idol for some is family, particularly one's children. There are those who place their children above God, practically speaking. They adore and love their children more than they adore and love God. They would do anything for them and make any sacrifice, something they would not do for the Lord. If a choice has to be made between one's child and God, the child comes out on top. A contemporary example: some Christian parents condemn homosexuality as a sin until they discover that their own daughter is a lesbian or their son is gay. Then their view on homosexuality changes, and they adopt some twisted interpretation of Scripture to justify their offspring.

Still other put country before God. They are patriots first, Christians second. Or perhaps their idol is their political party. It, not the church of Jesus Christ, has first call on their time, energy, thoughts, and money.

Love has been one of the great themes of 1 John. The first and greatest commandment according to Jesus is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind. To put someone or something ahead of the Lord is to have another God before him. That someone or something is an idol. John's parting command to keep ourselves from idols is a fitting end to his letter.

18 The English language itself recognizes that people make idols of things that are not God in coining the verb *to idolize*.

2 JOHN

LESSON 13: 2 JOHN 1-6

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The Greek word in v. 1 translated *lady* is the feminine form of the masculine word elsewhere translated *lord*. What does that suggest about the recipient if 2 John was written to an individual? What does it suggest if *lady* was a metaphor for a church?

2. What does the word *elect* in vs. 1 and 13 mean? You may want to consult a dictionary.

3. What important word does John employ five times in the first four verses?

Questions 4-10 deal with each use of the word *truth* in vs. 1-4.

4. *How* does John love the elect lady? *v. 1*

5. *Who else* loves her? *v. 1*

6. *Why do* they love her? *v. 2*

7. Under what conditions will grace, mercy, and peace be with us? *v. 3*

8. What gives John great joy? *v. 4*

9. Does v. 4 suggest that some of the lady's children are not walking in the truth?

10. What does *walking in the truth* mean?

11. What beginning does John refer to in v. 5?

12. What is the commandment we have heard from the beginning? *v. 5*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The Greek word in v. 1 translated lady is the feminine form of the masculine word elsewhere translated lord. What does that suggest about the recipient if 2 John was written to an individual? What does it suggest if lady was a metaphor for a church?

If the *lady* was an individual woman, the word suggests that she was of high status, perhaps even of noble birth. If *lady* is a metaphor for a congregation or church, the choice of the word suggests that the church of Christ is highly honored—it is not simply an assembly of like-minded people who believe in Jesus. The New Testament elsewhere speaks figuratively of the church as the beautifully adorned bride of Christ (Revelation 21: 2, 9).

2. What does the word elect in vs. 1 and 13 mean? You may want to consult a dictionary.

It means *chosen* or *selected* (out of a larger group).

3. What important word does John employ five times in the first four verses?

Truth.

Questions 4-10 deal with each use of the word *truth* in verses 1-4.

4. How does John love the elect lady? v. 1

He loves her in truth, that is, he truly loves her. His love is not feigned, hypocritical, or shallow.

5. Who else loves her? v. 1

All who love the truth. The elect lady is well known to true believers.

6. Why do they love her? v. 2

They love her because of “the truth that dwells in us and will be with us forever.” The *us* of v. 2 includes all who love the truth: John, the lady, and all the others who love her. All who receive the apostolic message of Christ in truth have loving fellowship with one another (1 John 1:3-4). John makes it clear elsewhere that love for our Christian brothers and sisters is a test of spiritual life (1 John 4:7-12). If we are truly born of God, we will love our brothers and sisters in Christ, near and far.

7. Under what conditions will grace, mercy, and peace be with us? v. 3

We will experience grace, mercy, and peace when we abide in truth and love. Grace, mercy, and peace are gifts from God for those who are his own; his own are those who abide in truth and love.

8. What gives John great joy? v. 4

John rejoices to find that some of the lady’s children are walking in the truth.

9. Does v. 4 suggest that some of the lady’s children are not walking in the truth?

Yes, it seems that it does. This doesn’t help us decide if the lady is an individual or a congregation. We all know of families where some children grow up to be believers and some do not; we all know of churches where some members have a living faith and some do not. John rejoices that some are walking in the truth even if all are not.

10. What does “walking in the truth” mean?

It means more than simply signing a statement of faith, more than believing in the head. It means being a doer of the Word and not a hearer only (James 1:22). It means letting the truth guide and direct our activity:

I appeal to you, therefore brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. *Romans 12: 1-2*

Walking in the truth results in walking in love, as we see in the next few verses.

11. What beginning does John refer to in v. 5?

It refers to the incarnation and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us. *1 John 1:1-2*

STUDY NOTES

1. The “elect lady.”

Commentators differ with respect to who the *elect lady* was. Some hold that the elect lady was an individual woman and that her children were her natural offspring. Other commentators believe that John is using a metaphor to denote a local congregation and that the children are the church members. If the elect lady is a church, the calling or election preceded the elevation to honor. If the elect lady is an individual, her nobility preceded the call. And that is worth taking note of. The Apostle Paul states that not many noble are called to be Christ’s (1 Corinthians 1:26-27). As an individual woman, an *elect lady* is a rarity, a person of high worldly status chosen and called by God.

There are arguments to be made for each view; however, we don’t need to evaluate the evidence and make a decision as to which theory is correct. It is enough that we seek to learn and apply the teaching of this letter to ourselves and our churches today.

2. Love and the commandments.

Love is a word with many meanings. Different people think of different things when they think of love. What is Christian love? What does the Bible mean by love? What does John mean here?

John tells us exactly what he means by love: “this is love, that we walk according to his commandments” (v. 6). John does not go on to enumerate all of God’s commandments. He doesn’t have to, for the elect lady would know what Jesus said about the commandments and love:

A lawyer asked [Jesus] a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and Prophets.”
Matthew 22:36-40

The apostle Paul also related the keeping of the commandments to love:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.
Romans 13:8-10

For Jesus and for John, love shows itself in action.

LESSON 14: 2 JOHN 7-13

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What error were the deceivers were propagating? *v. 7*
2. What does John call these deceivers? *v. 7*
3. What are we to do with such teachers? *vs. 8-10*
4. What might John mean by the words, “goes on ahead”? *v. 9*
5. Can you think of any contemporary examples of so-called Christian teachers who have “gone on ahead” of the Bible’s teaching?
6. Even though John has much to write, he would rather wait to share those things until he can speak with the elect lady face to face, *v. 12*. What does this reveal about his relationship with the lady?

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the commandment we have heard from the beginning? v. 5

It is Christ's commandment to love one another. See also 1 John 2:3-7, Lesson 3.

2. What error were the deceivers were propagating? v. 7

They denied that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh, that is, that he was a real man.

3. What does John call these deceivers? v. 7

He calls them antichrists. See also 1 John 2:18-19, Lesson 5.

4. What are we to do with such teachers? vs. 8-10

We are to watch ourselves so that we don't do anything that would lose us our reward. It goes without saying that we are not to be taken in by their teaching. We also are not to give them any aid; indeed, we are not even to greet them.

We will see in 3 John that John commends a certain Gaius for showing hospitality to traveling preachers or missionaries. That was a manifestation of his love for his Christian brothers. But discernment is called for. Not all who claim to be preaching Christ do so in truth. In these verses John warns the elect lady against false preachers and tells her not to help them at all. To do so is not the love John enjoins.

5. What might John mean by the words, "goes on ahead"? v. 9

It likely means the same thing the Apostle Paul meant when he admonished the Corinthians "not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up" (1 Corinthians 4:6).

The danger is thinking one knows more than the basic gospel truth taught by the apostles and written down in Scripture. We know that the Gnostics, whose views on the evils of the flesh were similar to those of the false teachers troubling the church in John's day, believed they possessed advanced, secret knowledge not known to ordinary Christians. (The name Gnostic comes from a Greek word which means knowledge.) They had "gone on ahead" of the biblical gospel.

6. Can you think of any contemporary examples of so-called Christian teachers who have "gone on ahead" of the Bible's teaching?

Here are three examples. You can probably list more.

a. Feminists today, who demand that women be ordained as ministers and elders, know well that the Bible, in particular some of Paul's letters, restricts the offices of minister and elder to men (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6). Their argument for the ordination of women often asserts that we simply know more nowadays about the equality of men and women in the sight of God than Paul did. We now have a "more advanced" morality.

b. Those who argue for the acceptance of homosexuality as a valid lifestyle, indeed as acceptable in ministers, often assert that such inclusiveness represents a "higher" morality than that taught in the Bible.

c. Recently a denominational committee charged with selecting hymns for a revision of their hymnbook turned down the popular contemporary hymn, "In Christ Alone," because it contains the line, "And on the cross, where Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied." Committee members objected to the concept of God's wrath, even though it is clearly and frequently mentioned in the Bible. They had "gone ahead" of such a "primitive" view of God!

18. Even though John has much to write, he would rather wait to share those things until he can speak with the elect lady face to face. What does this reveal about his relationship with the lady?

It shows that he really does love her in truth. The more we love someone, the more we want direct, personal contact. A letter (or nowadays, an e-mail, voice mail, or text) is not as personal as a face to face meeting.

STUDY NOTES

1. Who were the deceivers?

It is unlikely that these deceivers denied that Jesus Christ existed or had appeared on earth. If that had been their error they wouldn't have gone around preaching at all. Their error was denying that the divine Son of God had become incarnate as a real flesh-and-blood man like us.

We know that this heresy existed in the second century, soon after John wrote. It is called *docetism*, from a Greek word meaning *to appear to be*. The Docetists taught that Jesus was a pure spirit who only appeared to be a man. To the Docetists and to the Gnostics who succeeded them, the flesh was inherently sinful. They could not accept that the Son of God would associate himself with flesh.

John wrote towards the end of the first century, and it seems that docetic tendencies had already appeared in the Christian community. The theme of the incarnation of the Son of God runs through John's writings. In his gospel we read:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. *John 1:14*

I am the living bread that came down from heaven....And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh....Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man, you have no life in you. *John 6:51, 53*

And in 1 John:

Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already *1 John 4:2-3*

2. Are the elect lady and her children in danger?

John doesn't seem worried that the elect lady or her children will be deceived. In his gospel John had recorded these words of Jesus:

The sheep [those who belong to Christ] hear his [Christ's] voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out....and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of a stranger. *John 10:3-5*

John had earlier expressed confidence that the Holy Spirit enables God's children to recognize error:

...so now many antichrists have come....But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you have all knowledge. *1 John 2:18, 20*

John's concern is not that the elect lady or her children will be led astray, but that she will be kind to the traveling false teachers, perhaps out of a mistaken idea of the extent of Christian love.

3. Shunning the false teacher.

America has an obsession with being nice, an obsession that shows up in many ways. Each driver waits at a four-way stop for the other driver to proceed first; we respond to mediocre accomplishments with excessive praise no one believes; we tell every clerk or salesperson we deal with to "have a good one;" we are exceptionally polite and friendly to those we would avoid if we could...you can add to the list.

Sometimes being nice is hypocritical, sometimes it is simply habitual, sometimes it is meaningless, but usually being nice is exactly what we should be.

But not always. John tells us it is *not* good to be nice when false teachers come to the door,

Do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. *10 and 11*

It's all right to stand on the front porch with a Jehovah's witness or Mormon missionary and reason politely, courteously, and firmly from the Scripture; but don't let him use your bathroom or offer him a drink of water, and certainly don't bid him farewell with, "Have a good one." If this sounds harsh and unfriendly, your argument is with John (the apostle of love), not me. That Jehovah's witness or Mormon is leading people to hell. We are to do nothing—not even be "nice"—that would help them on their way. The truly "nice" thing, the loving thing, is to seek to show him the way of salvation.

3 JOHN

LESSON 15: 3 JOHN 1-15

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does this letter tell us about Gaius? *vs. 1-8*
2. Who were “the brothers,” or “these brothers,” *vs. 3, 5*?
3. What had the brothers told John about Gaius? *vs. 3, 6*
4. What does Gaius’s behavior show him to be? *v. 8*
5. What does John tell us about Diotrephes? *vs. 9-10*
6. For discussion: Have you ever encountered someone like Diotrephes?
7. For personal reflection: Would you be bold enough to disregard the threats of a person like Diotrephes? Would you be bold enough to confront him?
8. Can we conclude that a person like Diotrephes did not preach the gospel? Can we conclude that such a one is not saved?
9. Could John have written v. 11 to keep Gaius from rendering to Diotrephes evil for evil?

10. Why do you suppose John mentions Demetrius, and who do you think he was? *v. 12*

11. Even though John has much to write, he will wait to share those things until he can speak with Gaius face to face. What does this reveal about his relationship with Gaius?

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does this letter tell us about Gaius? vs. 1-8

John says explicitly:

- a. It was well with Gaius's soul (v. 2).
- b. Gaius was walking in the truth, that is, he not only believed and adhered to the truth, but also lived in accordance with it. He was a doer of the Word and not a hearer only (James 1:22).
- c. He supported "the brothers" (vs. 3, 5); see below.
- d. Although John does not say so explicitly, we can also infer that he was in conflict with a certain Diotrephes; see vs 9-10.

2. Who were "the brothers," or "these brothers"? vs. 3, 5?

Apparently they were traveling evangelists or missionaries who went out from their own church "for the sake of the Name." It seems they came to Gaius in the course of their missionary activity and then went on their way to John. Verse 6b suggests that they returned from John carrying his letter to Gaius, and that they planned to set out from there as they continued their preaching for the sake of the Name.

3. What had the brothers told John about Gaius? vs. 3, 6

They gave a good report of him:

- a. Gaius was walking in the truth (v. 3). By giving the brothers hospitality and support he showed them that he put his faith into practice.
- b. He loved these brothers even though they were strangers to him (v. 6). That's how it should be with Christians. If I meet someone new and learn he is a Christian, I should recognize him as a brother in Christ and love him as a brother.

4. What does Gaius's behavior show him to be? v. 8

John says that those who give Christian workers the kind of support that Gaius gave the brothers are fellow workers for the truth.

5. What does John tell us about Diotrephes? vs. 9-10

He tells us:

- a. Diotrephes liked to put himself first. It seems he was successful in dominating the local church.
- b. He did not acknowledge John's authority, even though John was an apostle.
- c. He slandered John, talking "wicked nonsense."
- d. He will get a comeuppance from John if and when John visits the church.
- e. He refused to welcome the visiting evangelists and would not let others do so. Since Gaius did welcome them, we can infer that Gaius was not cowed by Diotrephes. There must have been open conflict between them.

6. For discussion: Have you ever encountered someone like Diotrephes?

Discussion. No names, please. Just describe the person's behavior.

7. For personal reflection: Would you be bold enough to disregard the threats of a person like Diotrephes? Would you be bold enough to confront him?

You may discuss this in class if you wish.

8. Can we conclude that a person like Diotrephes did not preach the gospel? Can we conclude that such a one is not saved?

We can't draw either conclusion. Some preach the gospel for the wrong reasons but preach it nevertheless. The Apostle Paul speaks to this point:

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. *Philippians 1:15-18*

Diotrephes may then have preached the gospel for the wrong reasons—maybe out of rivalry, seeking to be the number one preacher or the only preacher in his church.

As for whether one like Diotrephes could actually be a born-again Christian, again the Apostle Paul speaks to the point:

For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

1 Corinthians 3:11-14

Diotrephes could have been a born-again Christian; but if so, he was saved with nothing to show for his work, like one who escapes from a fire with nothing but the clothes on his back. No reward for faithful service for Diotrephes!

9. Could John have written v. 11 to keep Gaius from rendering to Diotrephes evil for evil?

Possibly. As suggested in the answer to study question 1, there must have been open conflict between Diotrephes and Gaius over welcoming the visiting brothers, and Diotrephes may have tried to cast Gaius out of the church. Gaius must have suffered grave provocation. Even the godly are tempted to reply in kind when they are wronged.

The Apostle Paul gives a similar warning to those he addresses as “beloved”

Repay no one evil for evil. ...Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” *Romans 12:17-19*

10. Why do you suppose John mentions Demetrius, and who do you think he was? v. 12

We can't know for sure who Demetrius was. Demetrius was a very common name in the Greco-Roman world. He might have been the bearer of John's letter, or one of the brothers who had not visited Gaius before but was now a member of their party as they returned to Gaius. This verse is a testimony to his Christian character.

11. Even though John has much to write, he will wait to share those things until he can speak with Gaius face to face. What does this reveal about his relationship with Gaius?

It shows that he really does love Gaius in truth (v. 1). The more we love someone, the more we want direct, personal contact. A letter (or nowadays, an e-mail, voice mail, or text) is not as personal as a face to face meeting between friends.

STUDY NOTES

1. The author.

A comparison of this letter with 2 John shows conclusively that both letters were written by the same person.

- a. Both are written by “the elder.”
- b. Both are addressed, “to [recipient], whom I love in truth”; the recipient of 2 John is “the elect lady” and the recipient of this letter is a certain Gaius.
- c. In v. 4 of both letters the author rejoices to see God’s children walking in the truth.
- d. Verse 13 of 3 John is virtually identical with v. 12 of 2 John.

2. Gaius.

Gaius was a common name in the Greco-Roman world (Julius Caesar was actually Gaius Julius Caesar). The Apostle Paul knew at least two men by that name. One was a traveling companion of his, named in Acts 19:29 and 20:4. The other was a man he had baptized in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:14). Paul’s host while he wrote Romans was named Gaius; he may well have been the same Gaius Paul baptized in Corinth, since commentators seem agreed that Paul wrote Romans while staying in Corinth

But the Gaius John knew almost certainly was not one of the Gaiuses Paul knew. John wrote 3 John at least 25 years after Paul wrote his last letter. The Gaius who received this letter is unknown to us except from 3 John.

3. “Peace be with you”—a mere formality?

“Peace be to you” was more than a formality with John. It is clear that Gaius would have been in conflict with Diotrephes, and the receipt of a letter from an apostle whom Diotrephes refused to recognize would not have calmed the situation. John wishes him the peace that passes understanding that keeps our hearts and minds in Christ (Philippians 4:6-7).

4. Early missionaries.

John commends Gaius for his efforts on behalf of Christian brothers he didn’t know who went out into regions they didn’t know for the sake of the truth. Today we would view these brothers as missionaries.

These early missionaries were different in some ways from missionaries today. In the first place, they were unpaid. Where they found fellow believers they lodged with them. In that respect they followed the practice the Lord commanded the Twelve to follow when he sent them out:

And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two...He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts—but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there.” *Mark 6:7-10*

Christians are instructed to welcome those who come to them in such a way:

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. *Hebrews 13:1-1*

Gaius, whom John commends for walking in the truth (v. 3), was also walking in love when he supported the missionaries who came to him. John emphasizes the close relationship between truth and love in his writings (see especially 2 John). We can be like Gaius in extending hospitality to missionaries, even though most missionaries today receive financial support from a church or

mission agency. Missionaries welcome a home-cooked meal and a bed in a Christian home as they visit churches during their home assignment. It creates a bond between the missionary and those at home who pray and support them financially.

If we compare 3 John with 2 John, we see that John warns the Elect Lady of 2 John *not* to welcome the “missionaries” who came to her, for they were preachers of heresy. But he commends Gaius for welcoming faithful heralds of Christ.

5. Bullies in the church.

A leader by definition has a certain amount of authority over the group he leads, but there is a difference between exercising authority and being authoritarian. An authoritarian leader does more than exercise proper authority. An authoritarian leader seeks not to lead but to control and dominate. He dominates those under him and seeks to put all under him; he bullies and threatens those who are reluctant or unwilling to acknowledge his absolute authority. Everything has to be done his way.

Churches sometimes come under the domination of authoritarian leaders. Diotrephes was one such authoritarian leader; indeed, it seems fair to call him a bully. How he attained dominance in his congregation is not stated in 3 John. Perhaps most church members were too meek to resist; perhaps they were easily intimidated.

Diotrephes was unable to browbeat Gaius. Gaius offered support to the visiting brothers in spite of Diotrephes’s opposition. John promises that if he comes he will have it out with Diotrephes. Diotrephes did not recognize John’s superior authority as an apostle, but John expects to emerge victorious in their confrontation. That outcome would not be surprising even from a human point of view, for bullies are often cowards at heart; but we can be sure that John expected to prevail because God would bring it about.

Christians leave churches for various reasons; one of those reasons is authoritarian leaders. We are not to resist legitimate authority in the church. If we are of the truth we will know whether authority is legitimate or not. If it is not, it is the calling of those who know the truth to resist illegitimate authority in the power of the Holy Spirit. By their resistance and stand for the truth they can strengthen the weak knees of those who are easily cowed.

One thing we must not do in opposing bullies in the church: we must not adopt their tactics, for John tells Gaius “Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good” (v.11). For one authoritarian to succeed another is typical of a banana republic, not the church of God.

Sometimes, in the providence of God, those who know the truth will not be able to persuade the majority to stand up to the authoritarian; then they must leave if they are not forced out. May God keep us from authoritarian leaders in our churches! If they arise, may God make us valiant for the truth and enable us to face down those who by their authoritarianism bring reproach on the cause of Christ.