

Walking in the Light

A Study in the First Epistle of John

Murray McLellan



gracesask.com

Grace Fellowship

Copyright © 2026 by Murray McLellan

All rights reserved.

This book may be reproduced in any form without express written permission from the publisher or author. Feel free to use however you would like, but contact the author out of courtesy.

Contents

Preface	1
An Introduction to 1 John	2
1. Fellowship With God	7
2. Walking with God	10
3. Children of God	19
4. The Love of God	26
5. Life in God	31
Contact	41

Preface

Presented by Murray McLellan, an unworthy sinner upon whom the kindest of Kings has poured grace unimaginable. May it please God to use the following manuscript to advance the faith and joy of his people. My foremost desire is to magnify and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Unto him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

An Introduction to 1 John

**Author: John – Sinner, Disciple, Apostle, and Beloved
Friend of Jesus**

After Jesus' resurrection from death and ascension back into Heaven, Christianity flourished despite widespread persecution. However, as the first century drew to a close and new generations of Christians began to fill the church, the greatest threat to the health and survival of Christianity became false teachers who were eroding truth from within the church. Subsequently, the halfhearted, waning zeal of young Christians, combined with the militant zealotry of false teachers, became such an urgent and serious matter that John wrote a very loving and personal pastoral letter of instruction to a number of churches. Each was struggling with various false teachers and false doctrines that were confusing Christians and causing mean-spirited infighting within the churches.

John's passion throughout the letter is motivated by his deep love for Jesus and Jesus' people - the church. In the history of the world, it is possible that no one has known Jesus better or loved Him more than John, and for

good reason. John was the youngest of Jesus' disciples who was privileged to be called by Jesus and appointed to be an Apostle (Matthew 4:18-25; Mark 3:13-19). Additionally, John was among the inner circle of the three disciples who were closest to Jesus, and was therefore privy to some instruction and experience with Jesus that no one else was. John not only prepared the Last Supper (Luke 22:7-22), but he also sat in the seat of friendship next to Jesus and asked the Lord who would betray Him (John 13:23-26). Following the Last Supper, John witnessed Jesus weep and sweat blood in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46), and followed Jesus to His trials (John 18:15-18). John stood at the foot of Jesus' cross and watched His suffering (John 19:16-27), and was appointed by Jesus to care for His mother, Mary (John 19:25-27). Three days after Jesus' death, John was one of the first to enter the empty tomb (John 20:1-9), shortly thereafter, saw and recognized Jesus after He rose from death (John 21:1-14), and later stood gazing into the sky as Jesus ascended into Heaven (Acts 1:1-11).

John carried on the ministry of Jesus with faithful and courageous devotion, leading the church through its early seasons of struggle, persecution, sin, and heresy. To serve and strengthen the church, John wrote *The Gospel According to John, 1, 2, and 3 John*, and later received and wrote down *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. And, though every other Apostle had been murdered, John continued to lead the early church and train its next generation of pastors faithfully. An attempt was made to murder John by boiling him alive, but God spared his life. John was then exiled to the Island of Patmos where on a sad Sunday, sitting by himself contemplating his ministry and nursing his wounds, John was visited by Jesus who came down from Heaven in all of His glory to lovingly encourage His dear friend (Revelation 1:9-20). John eventually returned to Ephesus and continued his ministry. It is recorded in church history that when he was too old and feeble to preach or even stand, John had himself carried into the church gathering; and, with a feeble voice

he simply articulated the heart that Jesus had for all of His followers, saying, “Little children, love one another,” (1 John 3:18) and “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” (3 John 4)

And this is simply the heart of I John. After all that John went through with and for his great God and dear friend Jesus, he was not going to allow false teachers to confuse the new Christians he loved deeply. Therefore, John wrote his letter to primarily younger and newer Christians as their pastor/grandpa who continually refers to them (and us) as “my dear children.”

Throughout his letter, John clearly teaches that the four purposes of his writing are that we may have:

1. Joy - 1:4
2. Holiness - 2:1
3. Correct doctrine - 2:26
4. Assurance of our salvation - 5:13

Sadly, false teachers, when combined with both our wrong thinking and sinful desires, can cause some Christians to lose the certainty of their salvation, clarity of their doctrine, commitment to holy living, and cause for joy. This leads to a life of sadness, sin, heresy, and uncertainty about whether God does love them. So, John lovingly and brilliantly centers his teaching on who Jesus is, what Jesus has done, and how Jesus transforms our lives.

To help you study the book of 1 John for yourself, it will be good to begin by reading the book repeatedly and circling or highlighting any time one of these three themes appears:

1. Know

2. Love for and fellowship with God
3. Love for and fellowship for one another

As you study what John means by these words you will discover that it is important that we **know** who Jesus is and what He has done for us, that we embrace Jesus' **love** for us, and embody that love by loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, as we **fellowship** together as God's family.

John writes his letter primarily to inform someone of how they can know that they are a Christian who has Jesus as their God (I John 5:13). And, the entirety of his letter breaks down into three categories that are helpful in determining if you are a Christian. In short, these categories simply demonstrate that someone cannot become a Christian without experiencing a transformation in how they: (i) think theologically, (ii) act morally, and (iii) relate socially.

Theological Transformation

Do you believe that Jesus is the eternal God who became a man?

Moral Transformation

Do you admit that you are a sinner and desire to stop sinning and instead reflect Jesus in living in line with his Word?

Social Transformation

Do you receive God's love and love Him and other Christians?

It will be very helpful for you to look for these three categories of life transformation caused by Jesus as you read the book. It will also be helpful for you

to examine your own life in light of John's inspired words so that you may be certain of your salvation and life—a life of correct doctrine, holiness, and joy as God intends for you. It is imperative, however, that people realize that they are not saved by doing these things, but rather saved people naturally believe and embody these things because God has changed their hearts.

Therefore, as you read and study this great book of the Bible, it will be most helpful for you to first pray that God would help you examine the book accurately, and that your own heart would be examined by the book, and that God would use it to transform you to be more like Jesus. Ask God the Holy Spirit, who is mentioned throughout the book as the source for new life in Jesus (2:20, 27; 3:24), to transform your life to know and love Jesus more and more, which is the entire point of the book.

Fellowship With God

A Witness of the Incarnation and Resurrection (1 John 1:1-4)

John begins his letter by establishing his credibility as a witness and teacher. He reasons that, because he was a friend and Apostle of Jesus who was present for His entire ministry to hear Jesus' teaching, see Jesus' life and miracles, and touch Jesus' physical body, he is the most credible teacher about Jesus. His argument is very important because, in his day, there were no such things as cameras and video cameras—it was eyewitness testimony that would have been the most credible piece of evidence. John's summary of Jesus is that He was/is the Word of God (or how God the Father has spoken to us to reveal his heart), the eternal God who at a point in time entered into human history as a man, who has made it possible for us to have friendship with God and with one other as the church.

John then gives the first of four reasons why he has written the letter: that God's people may have joy through their friendship with each other and with God the Father, which is all made possible through Jesus (1:4). In this section we learn the primacy of clinging to the eyewitness accounts of the Apostles that Jesus was/is both fully God and fully man, without being led astray by

persuasive false teachers armed with their legion of books, websites, podcasts, and the like.

For Discussion:

1. What is the purpose of this letter according to verses 1-4? What do these verses (particularly the reference to “what we have heard, seen, and our hands have touched”) tell you generally about the nature of the Christian faith, and particularly our fellowship with God? What is John trying to get across about “fellowship with God?”
2. Why should we trust eyewitness testimony of Jesus’ life over the critiques of people who lived long after He ascended back into Heaven?
3. Why is fellowship only possible with God and each other through Jesus?
4. These verses paint a picture of pure, sweet communion with God, which many of us do not enjoy so regularly. What are some of the reasons our own fellowship with God may be lacking?

Walking in the Light (1 John 1:5-10)

John moves from his opening comments about Jesus as fully God and fully man and our fellowship with him, to teaching about our sin problem. He first teaches that God is neither sinful, nor the cause of any human sin. He then teaches that if we love God, then we will hate sin and see a change in our lives as we learn to confess our sin and have victory over it. This is what it means to walk in the light. And, though our goal is to not sin, the fact remains that though we can and will grow in holiness we will never be without sin in this lifetime. Therefore, we will continually need to repent of sin and seek forgiveness from Jesus who died for our sin in our place.

For Discussion:

1. In looking at verses 5-10, what is a major hindrance to enjoying true fellowship? What claims do people make to pretend that sin doesn't effect their relationship with God?
2. If according to Scripture there is no condemnation in Christ (Romans 8:1) and our guilt has been removed (Hebrews 10:22), then why does our sin still get in the way?
3. How did becoming a Christian alter your view of your own sinfulness?
4. How has repentance of sin and Jesus' cleansing brought healing and new life to you? Why is it important that we know that Jesus not only forgives our sin but also cleanses us from the stain of our sin and the sins that have been committed against us?

Walking with God

Jesus Christ Our Advocate (1 John 2:1-6)

John's chief concern in this letter has been communicating the possibility for every Christian to have joy in fellowship with God, along with the serious prospect of the joy of that fellowship being temporarily lost through living a life of sin. He wants Christians to take their sin with the utmost seriousness, knowing it can destroy this precious communion, which alone has the ability to bring joy. He further demonstrates how the joy of that fellowship can be restored - namely through the continual application of the gospel to oneself through a daily life of faith and repentance. Basically, John points out that sin is inexcusable. Therefore, we ought not to seek to justify our sin or blame it in on someone else. It ought to be taken seriously and not treated lightly, but sin *is* inevitable. Until we die we will have to deal with the reality of indwelling sin in our lives, and sin is forgivable because of God's mercy through Christ.

C.S. Lewis wonderfully demonstrates this dynamic of faith and repentance in, *The Horse and His Boy*. It is the story of a little slave boy named Shasta and a horse who had been kidnapped. Both had evil and oppressive masters and when brought together, they made plans to escape. Their conversation reads:

“By the way, I suppose you know how to ride?” said the Horse.

‘Oh yes, of course,’ said Shasta. ‘At least, I’ve ridden the donkey.’

‘Ridden the *what*? In other words you can’t ride. That’s a drawback. I’ll have to teach you as we go along. If you can’t ride, can you fall?’

‘I suppose anyone can fall,’ said Shasta.

‘I mean can you fall and get up again without crying and mount again and fall again and yet not be afraid of falling.’

‘I - I’ll try,’ said Shasta.

‘Poor little beast,’ said the horse in a gentler tone. ‘I forgot you’re only a foal. We’ll make a fine rider of you in time.’”

This is a wonderful picture of what it means to live the Christian life. Every time we fall, we are called to get back up again, looking to God’s love and provision for us in Christ, our advocate. We are to repent of our sins, recognize our own powerlessness, and try again in dependence upon him. As time goes on, we will find ourselves staying on the horse longer and longer. Other lessons in the Christian life will help us break our besetting sins, just as there are other things to learn in riding a horse besides how to fall, but learning to fall in such a way that you get up again is foundational.

Francis Fenelon said, “Do not be discouraged by your faults. Bear with yourself in correcting them, as you would with a neighbor.” Lewis says we may be sure that perfect chastity, like perfect charity, will not be attained by human efforts. You must ask for God’s help, and even when you have done so, it may seem to you for a long time that no help, or less help than you need, is being given. Never mind. After each failure, ask forgiveness, pick yourself up, and try again. However important chastity (or courage, or truthfulness, or any other virtue) may be, this process of repentance trains us in habits of the soul that are more important still. It cures our illusions about ourselves

and teaches us to depend on God. We learn on the one hand, that we cannot trust ourselves even in our best moments, and, on the other, that we need not despair even in our worst, for our failures are forgiven.

For Discussion:

1. In 2:1, what is John's purpose in writing these things? How does what he has written in these first six verses of chapter 2 relate to that goal?
2. Notice that although John *says* he has written these words so we "would not sin," he is also realistic by following it with, "But if anybody does sin..." What solution does John suggest on a personal level? How should this manifest itself on a daily basis? What are some other ways we seek solutions for our sin? Why do we seek other solutions, and why are they inadequate?
3. Essentially, John is calling us to a life of ongoing faith and repentance. What is repentance? What is its role in the Christian life? Why is it so important, and why are we doomed to a life of discouragement and depression without it?
4. Practically speaking, what does it mean to "walk as Jesus walked?"

Living in the Light (1 John 2:7-14)

Not only are Christians supposed to hate sin, they are also supposed to love God (demonstrated in their obedience to His Word) and love fellow Christians. Here John basically restates Jesus' summary of the Old Testament in Matthew 22:34-40 where He taught that the commands of the Bible were intended to show us how to love God and other people. Conversely, anyone who claims to be a Christian but has hatred toward a fellow Christian is actually living in the evil of darkness, thereby ruining his life and his church.

Indeed, these simple points of loving God by obeying Him and loving His people are the twin pillars of church life. In this section God intends for us to learn that our theology is not just ideological, but also intensely practical, and to be lived in our daily lives by obeying God and loving people; otherwise, we may be orthodox with our beliefs and heretics with our behavior.

Love of our neighbors is proof of our love of God. It is one of the ways we love God. Such a love will be a visible love and serves as a test of authentic faith. It is a way that invisible love to an invisible God becomes visible. To claim to love God without loving one's brother, whom God himself loves, is a spurious claim. To hate or act indifferently to your brother is a failure to acknowledge God at the most basic core of who he is. It indicates one's claim to know God is false.

John then finishes this section with words of encouragement for the whole church. Despite our sin, and in our striving to love one another even when it is difficult, true believers in Christ are forgiven, know Jesus and the Father, are strong, have overcome Satan, and have the very word of God abiding in us by the Spirit!

For Discussion:

1. John learned from Jesus that love for God precedes and causes obedience to God (e.g. John 14:15,21-24). How does this differ from the teaching of other religions that if you obey God, he will love you?
2. Why does love for God naturally produce obedience to God?
3. What command is John writing about in verse 7? How can it be new and old at the same time? What gives the commandment a sense of newness since Jesus' coming?
4. How can Christian love for one another be a means of non-Christians' better understanding the gospel? Is there any Christian(s) who you are not on loving terms with and need to forgive or make amends with? What is your plan to do so?

Do Not Love the World, But Abide in Christ (1 John 2:15-27)

Worldliness in the Bible does not mean that Christians are to abstain from culture, but rather that we should abstain from the ways of thinking, valuing, and behaving that are contrary to God's will, as revealed in Scripture. John describes worldliness as the cravings of our sinful flesh (gluttony, sexual perversion, drunkenness, etc.), lust of our eyes (sexual lust, coveting, etc.), and arrogant pride that causes us to focus on ourselves without ever thanking God. Therefore, John reminds us that this fallen world in its present form is going to burn up in the end; but if we belong to God we will live forever with Him, and so we must remain ever vigilant to love God and not the world.

Many people believe the Biblical understanding of 'the world' refers to the material earth. This is not how the Bible measures the world. The Scriptures are clear that the earth is the Lord's and that it is good and will be redeemed in the end. It has been given to us to enjoy. Good relationships, laughter, beauty, music, work, good food and drink are all gifts from God meant for our pleasure, sustenance and enjoyment. In this sense, Christianity is world-affirming. When Biblical writers speak of the world negatively, they mean the world system as it has been perverted and serves as opposition to the believer. This refers to the world of untamed desire and arrogance, including all anti-Christian structures, methods, goals and ideologies. People are 'worldly' when they operate by standards solidly opposed to God's. 'Worldliness' is apparent whenever we take the good things of God and use them in ways he never intended them to be used.

It is this misuse that John has in mind when he speaks of the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does. The problem of worldliness occurs when we don't receive God's gifts with

thanksgiving and enjoy them in the context and way he intended. The gift of wine can be corrupted and used for drunkenness. The gift of material objects can become idols of extravagance. The gift of sexuality can be distorted in adultery. The gift of work can be used to gain power. The good gifts of God can be misused to sinful ends. Worldliness does not just take place in our behavior, but in our hearts. In fact, both James and Jesus indict their hearers for the worldliness seen in their prayer lives. Wise Christians will be aware of how subtle and insidious the world can be in its ability to infect them, their thinking and their actions.

The predominate characteristic of an antichrist is one who has gone astray and now seeks to lead others astray through false teaching. It is not an overtly contemptible character which identifies one as an antichrist, but his or her twisting of the truth and propagation of lies.

Practically speaking, we see people who appear to lose their salvation all the time, but John tells us if they walk away, you can rest assured that they were never really saved in the first place, no matter what appearances may have seemed. One's presence in the church does not guarantee their perseverance in the faith, but those who truly are "anointed by the Holy One" (2:20) – that is, born of the Spirit - will persevere to the end. This teaching should prevent us from having false presumptions, and ought to lead to examine ourselves from time to time to test and see if we are truly in the faith. However, it ought not to lead us to anxiety about our salvation, but ought to give us confidence that if God has caused us to trust in Christ, then God will keep us. We need not live in fear. God is faithful even in the midst of our fluctuating faithfulness.

Many Christians look for some secret to make their lives easier and free from struggles, but no such secret exists. The Christian life is always a battle. If people don't realize this and fruitlessly wait for the fighting to abate, they will either think God is not faithful (since he is not providing an end to the

warring), or that they are doing something wrong. Either way, a person will be left continually frustrated. This may lead them to either throw in the towel all together and scrap the Christian faith as unable to deliver what it promises, or they may hold on to their beliefs, but cease striving and give in to despair. Only people who look reality right in the face and realize they are engaged in a life-long war against their sin, the world and the devil, will live the Christian life with zeal. It is in this reality that we apply the Gospel, resting and relishing in Christ's sacrifice. We ought to realize a couple of things about the conflicts that we face.

1. First of all, God uses them to change us and transform us. God is concerned more for our holiness than our immediate and temporary happiness, because he knows that ultimately, holiness is the high road to eternal happiness with him. Struggle changes us and serves to prepare us to live with God and dwell with him.

2. Secondly, in the midst of conflict, we ought to realize that the battle belongs to the Lord. He will bring to completion the work he has begun in us. He has promised to give us the necessary strength to withstand the temptation if we will come to him in dependence, expressed in prayer; where we acknowledge that apart from him, we can do nothing, but that we can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens us.

For Discussion:

1. According to these verses, what do you think John means by "the world?" What things do you think are sometimes wrongly included in that term?
2. What does it mean to "love not the world?" In what ways does God love, and not love, the world? How does this principle of "being

in the world, but not of it” manifest itself in Jesus’ life? What are the consequences if we don’t have a right understanding of this principle?

3. What is it about the world that makes it so alluring and attractive to us? What are the motivations John gives us to refrain from loving the world improperly? How does one keep these motivations at the center of one’s heart and mind?
4. According to verses 18-27, what characterizes the antichrist and antichrists? What is the central evil action in which they are engaged?
5. What does verse 19 tell us about those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ, but later deny him? What does it tell us about their salvation? Were they once saved and then lost their salvation? Or were they never saved in the first place? How should it affect the way we live?
6. What are the two resources we have to prevent us from being led astray? To what do each of those things refer, and how do we maintain them in our lives?
7. This passage reminds us that the Christian life is a battle from beginning to end and that there *will always* be opposition until resurrection at the second coming of Jesus. What difference does it make in our lives to grasp hold of this truth? Why is it important to know this? What other biblical truths can encourage us in the ongoing conflict which is part and parcel of the Christian life?

Children of God

The Blessing of Being a Child of God (1 John 2:28-3:3)

In this passage, John continues to motivate and encourage us to protect and enjoy the relationship we have with God. The encouragement is brought to us by reminders of the second coming of Christ, warning us to keep from sin and walk in godliness as we await his appearance and the corresponding judgment. God has made us his very children, with all the status and privilege that is implied in that relationship. We may enter into his very presence with great confidence and joy. Still, we ought to make sure the evidence of that standing with God is present in our lives.

Our fundamental identity is to be grounded on the fact that “God is my loving, heavenly Father, and I am his beloved child.” People obviously get their identity from many things, such as physical appearance, work, success, family background, possessions, etc. The strength (however dubious) of such identities is that for a time, they make us feel good about ourselves, and others respond to us based off them, however faulty they may be. Since such identities work for a time and our culture responds to them, they are powerful influences.

It is difficult not to buy into the belief that such things can give us significant identity. All of us are swayed at one time or another to pursue our identities along these lines. However, the long term consequences are disastrous.

We have a far more amazing identity in Jesus. We are children of God. Does that not amaze you? There are two reasons why we don't share John's amazement: we forget from whence we came and where we are going. We do not realize the privileges of our position. The news that John gives will never amaze us as long as we feel that in some way we deserve that status of children of God. It is only as we understand the truth that by nature, we are objects of God's wrath and deserve only the most severe judgment and condemnation, that wonder and amazement characterize our response. God had no reason to treat us as children. In our fallen state we are his enemies. But he treats us as sons in whom he delights and whom he loves in the same way he loves his Son who was sinless and did nothing but completely please his Father. Until we begin to grasp this, we will never be thrilled by this truth. God takes the initiative in our adoption. He does so not for anything worthwhile which he *sees in* us, but in spite of all of the ugliness, hate, and rebellion which he sees in our hearts. God is in the business of adopting delinquents. And even now he is daily holding our hand, teaching us to grow up into this wondrous reality.

Our choices ought to be influenced by the fact that what we most long to hear and what will give us the greatest happiness and pleasure is our Lord saying, "Well done, my good and faithful servant." As John says, we want to be confident and unashamed at his appearing.

For Discussion:

1. What truths about Christ's second coming ought to motivate us toward godly and pure living, and how do they motivate us?

2. Would you say you generally think about the second coming as a motivation for living? If not, why not? Why is it to our detriment to think of Christ's return infrequently? What steps can you take to think on it more often, and live in the light of it?
3. Why does John tell us we are adopted children of God with a sense of amazement, wonder, and awe? Do you think on this truth with a sense of amazement?
4. According to J.I. Packer, the richest answer to the question, "What is a Christian?" is, "one who has God for his Father." What things are implied in this truthful understanding about God's relationship to us? What are the positive results when we understand this? Why do we find it so difficult to live in light of this truth?
5. Are we children of God because we behave righteously, or do we behave righteously because we are children of God?

Righteousness & Love: Two Marks of a Child of God (1 John 3:4-24)

What John is saying is that real change in our characters ought to be demonstrated. In fact, if we are truly children of God, our lives will manifest change in growth in holiness and love. If we don't see growth in godliness (though it may not always take place at the speed we want) then we need to take a serious look at the reality of our profession of faith. We might also add that the reason John states his position in such clear

categorical terms is to confound the false teachers who because of their false beliefs about the nature of salvation were indifferent to sin and denied its gravity. To them and to those whom they were influencing, John was declaring the incompatibility of the unrepentant practice of sinning in the Christian life.

When John says that sin is lawlessness (3:4), he removes the ability to treat it lightly and euphemistically as 'temperamental weaknesses' or 'personality problems' on which we might blame on our parents. By stating it the way he does, he drives home the fact that sin is not merely a negative failure but an active rebellion against God's will, and a violation of his holy character and law. Implied also in the idea of law is the Lawmaker. When one sins, he or she is not merely violating an abstract principle, but rather rebelling against the Lawmaker himself. Personally, it never really bothered me to transgress against an abstract principle, but it disturbs me deeply to know that I have offended God, the one who has gone to great lengths to demonstrate his love for me. It is important to understand sin relationally rather than abstractly.

John tells us that Christ "appeared in order to take away our sins," (3:5) and "to destroy the works of the devil" (3:8) so both sin's condemnation and its

power over us are taken away. We are thus set free to enjoy fellowship with God and to fight against sin. To fail to do either of these is incompatible with being a Christian. Jesus forgives sin. Jesus destroys its power. Jesus enables us to see our sin as a personal assault rather than an abstract concept.

Just as righteous living is evidence that we have been born of God, love for the brethren is evidence that we have passed from death to life. John's concern is that those to whom he is writing have a communion with God and one another which is free and unrestricted.

Our culture's obsession with love primarily highlights love as a subjective experience. It is defined as a feeling by which we are overwhelmed - a passion which consumes us. It is essentially selfish and self-centered in its character, focusing on 'me' and 'how *I* feel.' It is pursued as that which will make me happy. The negative consequences of this notion of love are legion. As soon as feelings dissipate (one falls 'out of love') one's sense of obligation to the other (be it a person, a community or a society) ends, and the other party is left to their own demise. Perhaps this is seen with no greater clarity than in marriage and people's attitudes towards it.

Traditionally, marriage had the force of lifetime commitment to the other person - to be there for him or her and to be 'for' the spouse no matter what. Marriage vows which were once a promise of future love are now seen as nothing more than a proclamation of present feelings. The essence of love is not seen as commitment to sacrifice oneself for another's well-being (regardless of whether such a commitment is accompanied by feelings of love and warmth.) We hear statements like, 'We just aren't in love anymore' or 'The spark is gone.' Because our obsession is with feeling good rather than being good. Our commitment to anything greater than ourselves is avoided and so our families, our friends, our churches, our communities and our society are weakened.

Probably a number of impediments and obstacles to loving others can be mentioned. A common one is our own *selfishness*. If something is going to cause us pain, discomfort or even inconvenience that might reduce our own temporary pleasure, then we often avoid it like the plague. Indeed, when we begin to reflect on our own lives with any honesty, we begin to realize that we are all paupers when it comes to loving others. So much of what passes as love is done only because it makes us feel better about ourselves and is convenient at the time. Often it does not stem from a heart concern for another's well-being. Relating to this obstacle, but not identical, is our inability to recognize the needs others have. This often stems from self-centeredness and laziness that does not work at recognizing their needs. We so often fail to ask ourselves, "Just what is going on in this person's life, and what can I do to encourage him and above all, push him closer to God?"

In short, John wants us to understand that nobody can claim to love the God who laid down His life for them, only to turn around and be unwilling to do the same for their brothers and sisters – the others for whom Jesus died. There is a death to oneself and one's selfish desires here (3:16). Real love involves bearing one another's burdens – loving "in deed and in truth" (3:18) – just as Jesus first loved us.

For Discussion:

1. What is John's definition of sin? Why are Christianity and habitual sin incompatible according to this section?
2. John tells us in a very black-and-white terms, that we are either children of God who live righteously or children of Satan who live sinfully. Taking into account John's statement that "anyone who claims to be without sin deceives themselves," how are we to understand his statement in vs. 9: "No one who is born of God will

continue to sin?”

3. What does John tell us about the nature of sin, and how does it give insight on your own sin? How does coming to Jesus change one's relationship to sin?
4. In calling us to a life of love, John first gives us an example of hate, in part to help us understand love, and in part to call us to examine ourselves. What does this passage tell us about hate? What is it's object, it's origin, it's provocation, and how does it manifest itself, both overtly and subtly? What does the presence of hate and the absence of love indicate about a person?
5. Using John's words in verses 16-18, how would you define love? Why is Christ's death on the cross the supreme example of love? How can that example help you to love difficult people? How is Jesus' example of sacrificial love much different than what most people today consider love?
6. C.S. Lewis wrote, "It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital 'H' than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular." What obstacles do we commonly encounter in seeking to love others? What prevents us from practically loving others? Of what truths can you remind yourself and what can you do to minimize this tendency?
7. Privately think of three people in your life who are difficult for you to love. Discuss practical steps can you take to love them better?

The Love of God

The Spirit of Truth (1 John 4:1-6)

In an elaboration of what John has said earlier about false teachers (antichrists), he confirms our need to remain unpersuaded by those who deviate from the central truths of the Christian faith. John is concerned all throughout this letter about exposing false teachers both through the content of their teaching and their lifestyles. We must discern which spirit(s) control and influence our teachers, either the Spirit of Christ or the spirit of Satan. There is really no stronger way of contrasting competing views of reality. A word or teaching that claims to be from God, may well come from Satan. That is strong language in a culture which values tolerance so deeply. Of course, tolerance is one thing and relativism is another. The former ought to characterize the Christian, the latter must be seen as an extremely dangerous, if not damning, flaw.

Active in our world are God and Satan, angels and demons. Therefore, just because someone has spiritual power or insight does not mean that the spirit(s) empowering them is from God. This would obviously include everything from the occult to witchcraft, and spiritual teachers and religious leaders who are both allegedly Christian and non-Christian. Therefore, we must carefully

test spirits by the messages they convey. Indeed, “every spirit that does not confess [the real biblical] Jesus is not from God” (4:3).

For Discussion:

1. In 4:1-6, John revisits the topic of false teachers. Why is it important to test them? What sets them apart from each other? How is John’s discussion helpful in our cultural climate where people tend to believe no one religious conviction is any better than any other?
2. Why are false teachers/prophets so popular?
3. Why is it so important to be discerning and to only embrace the instruction of true teachers?

God is Love (1 John 4:7-21)

This text is one of the greatest and most thorough texts in the entire Bible on what love is. It tells us that God is love, that God loves us in Jesus' death for our sins, and that God gives us His love to share with one another. It further explains that true love is not possible apart from God, but that by God the Holy Spirit we can love others as Jesus has loved us.

All along, John has been concerned to make certain that our communion with God is flourishing. In this passage, John goes to great lengths to convince us of the reality of God's love, as well as suggesting how truly knowing and relying on that love ought to affect our daily thinking and living before God. There are two particular ways in which our lives ought to be affected by the love of God.

1. First, if we truly know and rely on God's love we should no longer fear the condemning judgment of God. For "he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (4:11). Thus, just as God has removed all obstacles to have fellowship with us, so too ought we to remove all obstacles to our fellowship with him, regardless of how badly we may have fallen from obedience.

2. Secondly, if we truly know and rely on God's love, self-sacrificial love to others will naturally flow from us. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (4:12).

Some people look to their circumstances to discern the love of God. The problem with basing your understanding of God's love for you based only on the circumstances of your life, is that our circumstances and feelings fluctuate more often than the seasons. Christianity offers no assurances that your life will not at times be filled with tremendous difficulties and disap-

pointments. Many, if not most people, attribute an understanding of God with circumstances. They say, “God must not love me because... My business isn’t prospering... I’m still not married... My marriage is terrible... I haven’t been able to get a job, etc.” God’s love is thus seen as fluctuating wildly. There is no security in that. However, what John says implicitly in this passage is that it is not by our outer circumstances or by our emotions that we determine whether God loves us. In essence he *says*, “Don’t look there. Appearances and feelings can be deceiving. Look instead on two irrevocable gifts of God: He has given us his Son (vs. 9,10,14) and he has given us his Spirit (vs. 13). According to John, there is no other irrefutable and infallible evidence of his love: “This is how God showed his love among us.” It is in realizing that he has given you his Son and his Spirit that you are made certain of his love. Good circumstances are no guarantee of his love just as troubles are no guarantee of his displeasure. When you are tempted to look at your circumstances and draw the conclusion, “God doesn’t care about or love me,” you must fix your eyes instead on these two gifts and find yourself lost in wonder that anyone could be so lavish and generous towards you. No other piece of evidence can be strong enough to overthrow the testimony of these. As John wrote earlier, “*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are*” (3:1).

J.I. Packer writes, “*God is love’ is the complete truth about God so far as the Christian is concerned. Every single thing that happens to him/her expresses God’s love to him/her. God is love to him - holy, omnipotent love - at every moment and in every event of every day’s life. Even when he cannot see the why and the wherefore of God’s dealings, he knows that there is love in and behind them, and so he can rejoice always, even when, humanly speaking, things are going wrong. He knows that the true story of his life, when known will prove to be, as the hymn says, ‘mercy from first to last’ - and he is content. This kind of understanding of God’s love is necessary for living a healthy Christian life. Any*

lesser understanding leaves us impoverished, weak, and in less than the best state of affairs.”

For Discussion:

1. Why must our definition of love begin with God and now our feelings or opinions of what love is? What is love?
2. Many people look at the outward circumstances of their lives to determine whether God loves them. What is the problem with doing that? According to John, how do we really know God loves us?
3. What makes God's gifts of his Son Jesus Christ and his Spirit so precious in proclaiming his love for us? What do they accomplish in our lives?
4. How does being secure in God's love affect the way we view the changing circumstances (sometimes good and sometimes bad) of our lives?
5. In verse 16, John concludes, "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us." What do you understand that to mean? What does it mean to rely on something? How is knowing and relying on God's love manifested in daily living?
6. If perfect love drives out fear, why is it that we walk around in guilt and fear so often? What is the remedy to this?
7. What is your reaction to the great privilege and responsibility of being called to make the invisible God visible through a life of love? In which relationships do you most need to work on demonstrating this kind of love?

Life in God

His Commandments Are Not Burdensome (1 John 5:1-12)

In this section John continues on his great theme of love. He begins by saying that once we embrace God's love and love God in return out of our new hearts, we no longer need to serve God out of fear that He will send us to hell. Practically, this means that we do not need to seek to earn or merit God's love by doing good things out of fear of going to hell. Instead, God's love frees us from worrying about facing His wrath because Jesus has already suffered in our place on the cross; so we now can lovingly serve God freely from a place of love, not fear. Subsequently, because God loves us and we love God, we will also love the other people whom God loves—our Christian brothers and sisters. And, if we are truly Christians who love God, we will love to obey God's Word because we know that He is loving and good and therefore so too are His commands.

Being labeled 'born again' tends to be a negative phrase in our culture, often referring to a certain segment of Christians who are seen as unbalanced, naive, semi-literate, intolerant, sometimes self-righteous religious fanatics. In my estimate, this stereotype makes the phrase less than helpful in communicating to those outside the church. However, even if the phrase may be unhelpful

in our culture, the concept which underlies it is exceedingly important and crucial to one's understanding of the true nature of Christianity. To be 'born of God' (which is John's phrase for being born-again) means that God has given your heart spiritual life so you are awakened to his presence. He has given you a desire to love and serve him, rather than rebelling against and hating him (however covert the hatred may be). Rather than referring to a movement within Christianity, being 'born again' is Christianity. Whether a person uses a label like 'born again' is irrelevant. Being born of God is a reality not just a label.

The outward marks of those born from above are: belief in and love for Jesus as God come in the flesh to save us, love for others, and obedience to God's commands. If all three are not present, the claim to be born of God must be viewed with suspicion. How do these three marks relate to one another? Firstly, from what John says, the confession of Jesus as the Christ is foundational. Any claim to be alive to God without that confession must be seen as categorically false. The secondary characteristics of a life of love and obedience, which are also direct results of being made alive to God, must be present, but they must play a slightly secondary role. While they are important, we never perfectly display these marks, because we are fallen. In the world, what you actually believe is seen as relatively unimportant as long as you are a loving, generous person. Not so with the gospel. John declares that what you believe is of great and determinative importance. If a man or a woman does not believe that Jesus is God the Son, he or she cannot have been born of God and cannot be called a Christian. Still all the marks are indispensable: Faith that does not lead to love is meaningless and love that is not based on faith is powerless.

If people obey God's commands because of fear that they will be rejected, punished, or have God's love withdrawn if they do not obey, then obedience is very burdensome indeed. That is coerced obedience; obedience under pres-

sure. The Christian life under this motivation becomes performance-centered rather than acceptance-centered. Acceptance-centered obedience comes from knowing that we have already been accepted by God, rather than obeying to be accepted. It is grace motivated and driven rather than fear motivated and driven. We obey because God loves us, not to get him to love us. We seek to please God and walk in the way of his commands out of gratitude for what he has done, instead of out of fear of what he might do to us.

A second factor which makes God's commands *less* burdensome is the realization that they are not arbitrary, but are all intended for our good. God's commands are life-giving; it is only our sinful flesh that tells us otherwise. They serve as the operating manual for our lives and when we live by them, we are most fulfilled. Also, because God's commands are a reflection of his character, when we live by them we are imitating God and taking on the perfection of his character.

Even though his commands are not burdensome, that does not mean that they are always easy. Because we all have indwelling sin remaining in us, there will often be some struggle in obeying God's commands. Still, when we have struggled through and remained obedient, there will always be a joy no matter how difficult the struggle.

If we are to find Jesus' commands less burdensome, we must eradicate fear-driven obedience by preaching the gospel to ourselves. The truth that Jesus has already obtained perfect complete acceptance for us before God that cannot be withdrawn if we have placed our faith and trust in him removes fear. "We love because he first loved us" (4:19). We must fill ourselves with the understanding that God lavished his love on us while we were still sinners, and allow that love to spill forth in obedient gratitude.

In short, we must fight to remind ourselves that God has nothing but our good in mind and his commands are for our good. Whenever we are obeying God in order to avoid judgment or gain acceptance, or when we are viewing his commands as arbitrary, harmful and stunting to our humanity, then we will find the commands burdensome. When that happens, we must argue against such false thinking to convince ourselves of the truths of God's love, acceptance, and dedication to us.

Verses 6-12 form an argument which sounds strange to our ears and which is somewhat hard to follow. Still, the basic point is simple enough: "Jesus is who he claims to be - God in the flesh who offered himself as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin that we might be reconciled to God. Therefore believe in him or else forfeit your only hope for eternal life." What John is doing in this passage is pointing to historical events which prove that Jesus is the Christ. As in a court where one must provide the testimony of two or three witnesses in order to win the case, his evidence or testimonies are the following:

- Water: Jesus was baptized, and at that baptism the Holy Spirit descended on him and the Father's voice rang out saying, "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:17)
- Blood: Jesus was crucified as a sin-bearer and rose from the dead, thereby proving that the sacrifice was complete and acceptable. He was "declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 1:4)
- Spirit: Having believed on him, God speaks further testimony to our own hearts that Jesus is the Christ who has made us alive. In Jesus's words: "the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about Me" (John 15:26).

The three pieces of evidence or testimonies together prove beyond a doubt that *Jesus is* God in the flesh, our savior.

Jesus is the Christ. Receiving or rejecting this testimony is the most crucial response a person can make in this life. The question with which we are all faced is this: Have you received this testimony? Your reception or rejection in response to the evidence is determinative both for your present life, and your future life. A human analogy to this is marriage: When a person is asked, “Are you married?” the answer may be, “yes,” or “no,” but can hardly be, “I’m not sure!” The same is true for the question, “Do you have life?” Either you have life in Jesus or for all intents and purposes you have death. If you do not have Jesus, however full your life may seem, it lacks the vital life-giving center, and thus is only a husk without any substance. “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (5:12). The life to which John refers has as much to do with the here and now as it does with the future. Eternal life has less to do with the time frame and more to do with the quality of life (having what really matters and makes life meaningful). Eternal life begins now.

For Discussion:

1. How can we live in victory over the sin and temptations of the world?
2. What does it mean that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God?
3. John tells us the commands of God are not burdensome. What does he mean by that? Do you find this to be true in your life?
4. How serious is it to reject the testimony of Jesus?
5. In what ways is eternal life more than just living forever? See also John 17:3.

Our Father Hears Us (1 John 5:13-21)

In this section we also find the fourth reason that the book was written, namely to enable us to have certainty about our salvation (5:13). This certainty of our salvation is incredibly important because without it we would live with continual fear and worry about whether or not God loved us, which is a terrifying way to live.

John's desire is to enable his readers to respond to the question, "Do you have the Son and, with him, life?" He, of course, wants them to be able to answer in the affirmative and to be secure and assured of their standing before God. What are the tests for determining whether we have life? One writer breaks John's letter down into six tests:

- Test of consciousness of sin (1 John 1:8,10)
- Test of obedience (1 John 2:3-5, 29)
- Test of freedom from habitual sin (1 John 3:9, 5:18)
- Test of love for other Christians (1 John 3:14; 4:7-8)
- Test of belief (1 John 5:1)
- Test of overcoming the world and Satan (1 John 2:13-14; 5:4)

Still, there is some overlap in these tests. One can reduce the tests to three. Assurance can be tested by (i) obedience to God's commands, (ii) love for the brethren, and (iii) belief in, and love for, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God.

It might be helpful to point out that while these tests are a means to assurance, they are not the grounds for assurance. Your security is *not* rooted in the strength of your faith, but rather in the One in whom you have placed your

faith. That Jesus, the Son of God, died for sins and rose from the dead is our only certainty. He is our righteousness, our acceptance, our welcome, our completeness before God. If you confuse the grounds for your assurance with the means of assurance then you turn the Christian faith back into a performance oriented religion, and lead yourself back into obeying God out of fear and insecurity. To speak theologically, making this mistake confuses your justification with your sanctification. The means of assurance needs to be seen as corroborating evidence that you have genuinely placed your trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and your righteousness is a gift of God.

John closes this letter with the exhortation: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” An idol is anything which occupies the God’s place, anything which drives your life, anything in which you trust to make you happy and determines your behavior. Our hearts are idol factories and we are called to continually root out idols. To do this, you must first discern what your idols are. Become utterly ruthless with yourself in asking the questions:

- “Is there anything besides God which is driving my life? What causes me to do things which are contrary to his commandments? What things become the false motivation to keep his commandments?”
- “Is there anything besides God which I believe I must have in order to be happy?”

You must convince yourself that these things, when elevated to a position where they determine your behavior and happiness, are dangerous and destructive to you.

They pull you away from God, who alone can satisfy our longing hearts, and cause you to see him as *less* than sufficient to meet your needs, and cause you to insult him through disobedience and lack of contentment in him. They jeopardize your life. This not to say that these things, whether they be success,

acceptance, a companion, prosperity, or health are inherently bad in and of themselves. They are not, and it is not necessarily bad to desire them. It is only when they are elevated to a place in which they do not belong that they become evil.

Idols are one of the central concerns of Scripture and deserve to be explored more. We are only touching on it here. Still, it is a completely appropriate way for John to draw things to a conclusion. Since idols compete with God for our hearts and make loving fellowship with God an impossibility, then to exhort us in this way only makes sense. Idols are at the heart of our problems. We must do everything we can to remove them and keep ourselves from them. “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” (5:21).

For Discussion:

1. The assurance of our salvation comes down to one issue; what is that issue?
2. According to the rest of the book that preceded 5:13 what are evidences in a person's life that they have been saved by Jesus? What evidences in your own life do you lean on to help assure you of your salvation?
3. In verses 18-20, John begins to close the book with a flurry of encouraging truths and promises. What are they? Which do you find the most encouraging and why?
4. In the final verse John writes, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." What is an idol? How do you go about discovering your main idols? In light of John's message in this book, was is this exhortation a particularly appropriate way to bring the book to a close?
5. What is the most important thing you will personally take away after studying this book?

Contact

If you desire to contact Murray,
you can do so by writing to:

Murray McLellan

E-mail: murray@gracesask.com

Visit our website at: gracesask.com