

New Testament Handles

1 John

We begin our series on “NT Handles” tonight. The idea is to take NT letters and pull out their essential teaching and identify the authorial intended “handles” by which we might grasp this whole letter and easily pick it up in its entirety. Though these letters contain many separate truths (all important in their own right), the reality is that the individual truths are given in service of one of several main points that the author is trying to convey as he writes to a particular audience on one occasion, and generally for one primary purpose.

If we can keep in our mind that purpose, as well as those main teaching points that accomplish that purpose, then we will be better able to remember and carry with us the whole content of these letters, and actually have it available in our heart and mind to let it inform and direct our worship, service, and Christian living.

So, tonight we begin with the letter of 1 John – truly one of the more difficult and seemingly scattered writings of the NT. But in fact it is not scattered, it is not random truth statements – but rather a fairly poetic and purposeful series of blows from a hammer, driving the same 3 nails home, in service of one primary goal – to clear up confusion about what Christianity really IS and whether you really HAVE it.

Christianity, when properly and fully understood (particularly how it references the salvation of the soul), can be quite confusing.

Here is what I mean – [turn with me to John 6]. Jesus teaches that you cannot be saved merely because you want to be. You must be spiritually drawn to Christ by the Father (John 6:44, 65, cf 2 Cor 4:3-6). But when you are drawn by God’s Spirit, then you will internally want to be saved (John 6:37). And then you will internally believe / trust in Jesus Christ, and be saved (John 6:40,47). But there are some who profess belief in Jesus and even follow Him with great zeal for a time, and yet they do not believe (John 6:64,66, cf Matt 13, soil & tares)

So are you confused yet? And if all of this is going on internally, how can you know if you are really saved? Well, 1 John was written for you. Specifically two kinds of people...

1. Those who truly believe, and yet improperly doubt their salvation because of the inability to see the internal workings of their own heart.
2. Those who do not actually believe, and are wrongly confident in their salvation because of some momentary profession of belief in Jesus.

1 John is written in a time when lots of false teaching was beginning to spring up and many people were being confused as to who to believe and who were the true Christians with whom I should fellowship. John writes not only to clarify what true Christianity really is, but also to bring confidence to the mistakenly unassured of their place with Christ, and to bring conviction to the mistakenly assured of their place with Christ.

We know this is the purpose of his letter, because of the repetition of three particular phrases...

- “If we say...” 1:6,8,10; 2:4,6,9; 4:20
- “By this we know...” 2:3,5; 3:14,19,24; 4:6,9,13; 5:2,13,18,19,20
- “We may have confidence...” 2:28, 3:21, 4:17, 5:14

The whole letter is written around these statements – really a series of tests / proofs / evidences that invariably will show themselves in the life of a true believer, by which you can objectively assess whether or not you are truly a Christian.

That makes this letter tremendously useful in three ways...

1. You for yourself – to be confident that first you are truly in Christ, and second that you are living out the fundamental elements of what it is to be a Christian. Martyn Lloyd Jones says one of the greatest maladies and hindrances to Christianity in the world are Christians who have no strong assurance of their place in Christ – they will linger in the shadows of Christian worship, Christian service, and Christian holiness – because they are not fully convinced that Jesus is in fact all in all, and have no real sense of their identity as loved, justified, rescued, hope-filled, regenerated, Spirit-filled and empowered adopted child and now ambassador of God with a mission to shine the Light of Christ in a dark and dying world along with others who similarly know with absolute confidence their identity, destiny, and mission.
2. You in helping another believer to know their true place – we are called to be not only disciples, but disciple-makers, and 1 John ought to be one of our fundamental tools in our toolkit to help another professed believer in Jesus to understand the raw essence of Christianity and properly, biblically assess their own position with Christ. Though the salvation of our souls is a mysterious act of God that takes place entirely in the spiritual plane, invisible to the human eye, and unable to be manufactured by human desire, it need not be a mystery as to whether you are truly saved... John says in 1 John 5:13 – *These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.*
3. You in explaining true Christianity to an unbeliever – we are called to be witnesses to the world not only of Jesus Christ, but of His gospel message, and what it is to properly respond to Him for salvation. 1 John not only gives the fundamental response as its first test, but also two other characteristic outworkings that further explain what kind of “belief” God’s Spirit works into the heart of the ones He draws to the Son.

So, that is the point / purpose / usefulness... What are the Handles?

They come in the form of 3 Tests/Proofs of genuine faith.

Handle # 1 – The Jesus Test

What do you believe about Jesus? Who do you say that He is? What kind of Savior are you trusting in?

- a) You must believe that Jesus is the Son of God – 4:15, 5:5, 5:11-13

Jesus Himself claimed to be the divine Son of God (John 8:24,28, 58; 10:25-30), and demonstrated Himself to be equal with God by personally pronouncing forgiveness of sins against God (Mark 2:5-10) and placing Himself as the final judge of all men (John 5:21-27).

There is no wiggle room here – if Jesus were merely a sinless man, His death would lose its infinite worth as it could not have atoned for the sins of all humanity (perhaps only one other human). A true believer whole-heartedly believes that Jesus is God.

- b) You must believe that Jesus came in human flesh – 1:1-3, 4:1-3

This is no idle matter, neither in John's day nor our own – Jesus did not “appear” to be a human, nor was he merely a man who was later transformed into the Son of God. As the eternal Son of God, God sent Him He was born of a virgin, and grew and lived as a man – fully man, fully God. The consequences of this belief are real – for only a human death could fully stand in the place of another human (Heb 2:17, 10:4-14).

- c) You must believe that Jesus is the Christ – 2:22, 4:14, 5:1

He is the “Anointed One” of God, sent by Him to restore and bless all men. There is no other Christ (John 14:6, Acts 4:12, 1 Tim 2:5-6). One's full trust must alone be in Jesus, the Christ. Along with this belief in Jesus as the Christ, is the corresponding belief that you are a sinner in need of a Savior (1 John 1:8-10). His position as Christ is validated by His resurrection from the dead (Acts 17:31) and His ascension into heaven (Col 1:18).

- d) You must believe that Jesus offered Himself as the sinless sacrifice for sins – 2:1-2, 3:5,8, 4:9-10

That He bore the wrath of God on your behalf as He died on the cross (1 Peter 2:24, Isa 53:4-6), and thus He offers complete forgiveness of sins as the Advocate before God(1:9, 2:2) to those who believe that He is the sinless Son of God come in human flesh as the Christ who takes away sins (John 3:16, Col 1:21-23).

All true Christians have fellowship in this singular belief (1:3, 2:19, 4:5-6, 5:20). We believe this and proclaim this, not just a neat and tidy philosophy, but as objective, factual truth – i.e., reality.

Handle #2 – The Obedience Test

Repeatedly John claims of true believers – “we know Him.” Not know in merely an intellectual way, but in an experiential way. In other words, we are actually living in a relationship of proper fellowship with Him, day by day. Fundamentally, we are responding to Him for who He is – God and Lord. Thus if one is not morally obeying Him, the claim to “have fellowship with Him” / “know Him” / “believe in His name” is self-evidentially false.

- a) 1:5-7 – Walk in the Light
b) 2:3-6 – Keep His commandments

c) 2:15-17 – Do not love the world

d) 3:7-10 – Practices righteousness

Two caveats to this Test...

1. The Greek *present tense indicative* verbs (eg., “does not sin”) are not requiring perfection, but habitual, durative, characteristic action, which would include appropriate response when you do sin (1:9, 2:1).
2. This is not to put obedience on the same level as belief – obedience test is subsequent to the Jesus test. For there are plenty of people who live generally moral lives and do not believe on Jesus. But, if one claims to believe on Jesus and does not live an obedient life, this is evidence of falsity, not fidelity. Obedience is the tangible fruit of genuine trust in Jesus (Matt 7:17-23, 24ff; Heb 10:24ff). True believers habitually, characteristically, faithfully obey Him.

It is very simple. If you are a child of God, you will live like God. If you are a child of the devil, you will live like the devil. That’s all there is to it. Now, no Christian perfectly lives like God. And thankfully, no non-Christian lives exactly [or fully] like the devil.

But in a real sense, by this test a sincere, sensitive Christian can objectively assess their lives for not only increasing patterns of obedience and morally righteous living, but also an inability to tolerate sin, demonstrated in humble confession and forsaking when sins do occur – by this they can assure their hearts that they are obviously no longer a “child of the devil,” but now “born of God” (3:10).

And by this test an honest person who professes Christ, but has unconfessed, willfully tolerated, and arrogantly ignored patterns of sin in their life... they can mercifully come to realize that in no real sense do they actually “know Christ” nor “have the eternal life” He provides (5:12). Jesus said, *My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me, and I give eternal life to them* – John 10:27-28.

Handle #3 – The Love Test

Not only do God’s adopted children obey God, but also they Love others – with both heart and hand, but because John is interested in giving tangible tests by which we might be confident, it is the external actions of love that he primarily lists.

Love here is *agape* – the sacrificial blessing of another, regardless of the merit of the receiver.

- a) 2:9-11 / 3:11-15 / 4:20-21 – opposite of hating / envying another – the essence of these two vices is making yourself out to be superior than others, or purposefully rejoicing in (or participating in) their demise. This would also apply to milder forms of the same heart that puts you first or superior – relational indifference, racism, cheating, gossip, etc.)
- b) 2:16-20 – opening your heart (and thus your wallet, garage, time, talent, kitchen, empathy, etc.) to one in need, with God in Jesus Christ as our example (4:7-13). This would show itself first to the “brethren / fellow children of God” (4:16/5:1), but also to all our “brothers” in the widest sense possible (2:10). A refusal to do so

- c) 5:16-17 – as expressed in prayer to God for others’ spiritual well-being – if love is to be expressed in concern and help for the tangible needs of others, certainly it ought to show itself in the realm of spiritual / eternal needs.

Love anticipates – looks for and recognizes the need in others – 4:9-10a, Rom 5:6-8

Love initiates – takes first action to bless (“sent”) – 4:9,10,14,19

Love ameliorates – improves, makes a bad situation better, bless – 4:9b, 4:10b, 4:14b

Common Question – “how much must I love to be assured by this test?”

Valid question in a sense – for the over-scrupulous may condemn themselves because they fall short in the endless opportunities for love displayed.

Diagnostic question – “why do you ask?”

Is it because you are trying to limit you required acts of love to their bare minimum?

Is it because in seeking to love, you are finding your resources worn thin?

Is there a consistent and bubbling fountain of desire to emulate Christ in blessing others?

Do you find yourself drawn to opportunities to serve others, or do you find yourself shirking them?

Again, like the Obedience test, that you serve others does not accomplish your place with God – only your belief in Jesus Christ, Son of God come in the flesh, as the only propitiation for sins does that. But, those who are truly drawn by God’s Spirit to believe are also not only Justified, Adopted, Regenerated, but also Freed to love others (Gal 5:13) by God’s Spirit. So, they believe, they obey, and they love.

1 John should either assure or de-assure you. And as it does, it also points the way to the living of the Christian life –

- a) Trust – a continued confidence in your place and relationship with God, as your Example and Power Source as you seek to love and obey, and as your Advocate in your moments of sin.
- b) Obey – live life simply: just do what Jesus says, in every arena in which He has commanded. Humbly give Him His place as Lord and Christ, with your devotion and your obedience.
- c) Love – emulate the Father’s heart and the Son’s benevolence toward others – anticipate, initiate, ameliorate.