

That You May Know

*And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.
(1 John 2:3 ESV)*

*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.
(1 John 3:14 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

God Is Light

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1 John 1:5-2:29

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! I hope you brought your Bible with you and that you are able to open it now to 1 John 1:5. I think I mentioned last week that 1 John does develop a sustained argument in the same way that many of Paul's letters do. In fact, if you've read 1 John you know that it seems kind of repetitive – and it is. John basically says the same thing – twice. Only the second time he says it, he says it more expansively. That's not an accident, that's fairly typical of Jewish style. One commentator puts it this way, he says:

“For myself, I have found the image of a spiral staircase the most helpful. As you climb the central staircase in a large palace or stately home, you see the same objects or paintings from a different angle, often with a new appreciation of their beauty... The view gets more wonderful as you climb and the heavenly light shines more and more clearly until you reach the top.”¹

That's more or less how 1 John is laid out. There is an introduction – we looked at that last week and then there is “one time around the staircase”. John introduces a simple doctrinal theme – God is light. We're going to look at that today. And then he unpacks 4 implications of that simple truth. That's the first trip around the staircase. And then, starting in chapter 3, he does it all over again – but this time, he organizes around another simple truth: God is Father. And then he

¹David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters*, ed. John R. W. Stott, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 18.

unpacks 5 implications of that simple truth – the same 4 that he unpacked the first time – plus 1 more.

So the second time around is just like the first time around – only better. That’s a very typical Jewish and Eastern arrangement.

In terms of how best to read and preach through this material, I thought it might make sense for us to do the first trip around the staircase in a single take and then to come back next week to start the second rotation, only this time moving much slower and looking at each step and development in greater detail. So if you see something today that you don’t think is getting sufficient treatment just wait a few weeks until it comes back round again.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 5 of 1 John chapter 1.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:5–7 ESV)

I mentioned last week that 1 John is filled with simple truths and simple applications and here we see the first simple truth around which the first rotation of this letter turns: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

Simple Truth: God Is Light

Now what does it mean to call God “the light” or to say that God IS LIGHT? Well of course, these people were readers of the Old Testament – that was their Bible. Remember, this church got back on track when a huge influx of JEWISH CHRISTIANS immigrated to Asia Minor from Jerusalem in advance of the Jewish War with Rome. It was the Old Testament – and the Old Jewish Apostle that dragged this church up out of the mud of heresy and decline so we can safely assume an Old Testament frame of reference for this statement and we can of course assume familiarity with the earlier teachings of John. John had been their pastor for over 30 years – and

so everything he wrote before this – meaning the Gospel of John and the Revelation of John – was written originally for these very people.

With that in mind, we ask again, what would it have meant to these believers when John said that God is light?

Quite likely the first association that they would have made when they heard this statement from their Apostle would have had something to do with the concept of holiness.

1. Holiness

In the Old Testament the majesty and holiness of God is often described in terms of LIGHT. We think of the vision that Ezekiel had of God in Ezekiel chapter 1. Ezekiel saw a cloud that was surrounded by brightness and fire – and in the midst of the cloud a magnificent throne that was made it seemed of dazzling jewels:

“and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. ²⁷ And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and **there was brightness around him.** ²⁸ Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, **so was the appearance of the brightness all around.**” (Ezekiel 1:26–28 ESV)

When Ezekiel saw God the only way he could describe that experience was to compare it to the appearance of a rainbow. God is RADIANCE. God is BRIGHTNESS. God is LIGHT.

John used very similar imagery in his description of the exalted and ascended Christ back in Revelation 1. In his vision John described the Son of Man taking an inspection tour, as it were, of his churches. He said:

His eyes were like a flame of fire ... and **his face was like the sun shining in full strength.** When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. (Revelation 1:14–17 ESV)

So Old Testament and New – God is LIGHT. He is RADIANT and his HOLINESS is overwhelming. He is wonderfully, powerfully and entirely – OTHER. That’s what it means to say that God is light.

The second thing I think these folks would have associated with that description is the concept of life.

2. Life

In the Bible, light and life go together – they certainly did in the writings of John. In John 1:4-5 the Apostle introduces Jesus by saying:

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

So God is the LIGHT that draws people out of darkness and out of death and into the way of salvation. All the Apostles of Jesus used this sort of imagery – suggesting of course that it goes back to Jesus himself. The Apostle Peter for example said to his people:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of **him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.** (1 Peter 2:9 ESV)

So to say that God is LIGHT is to say that he is HOLY and it is to say that he is LIFE. And then thirdly, it is to say something about RIGHTEOUSNESS.

3. Righteousness

God isn’t just OTHER and he isn’t just A FORCE OF LIFE he is a source of a particular type of life. He represents justice, goodness and all that is RIGHT. John talks about that in John 3:19-21. He says:

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works

should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. (John 3:19–21 ESV)

So LIGHT has to do with LIVING and WALKING RIGHTLY – we think of Psalm 119:105 which says:

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Psalm 119:105 ESV)

So God is LIGHT – his ways are righteous altogether.

That’s the simple truth that John presents in the first version of his pastoral counsel. And now in the next chapter and a bit he lays out 4 rather obvious implications.

4 Obvious Implications

You can see that transition in verse 8:

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8 ESV)

Remember, this whole letter was occasioned by the unexpected DEPARTURE of a whole bunch of so-called Christians. This church had been rocked by a formal schism. A whole bunch of people had left and started a new movement and they were calling themselves Christians too. So how can we KNOW whether we are following God – or they are?

Well simple, John says. God is light. And therefore if you SAY that you are walking in the light – if you say that you are a Christian then obviously:

1. You will renounce sin

That’s the first obvious implication that John begins to tease out. Let’s read from verse 8 of chapter 1 all the way through to verse 2 of chapter 2. John says:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:8–2:2 ESV)

I mentioned last week that the heresy that was troubling this church was an early version of what came to be known as Gnosticism. The word “Gnosticism” comes from the Greek word for knowledge. Basically these folks wanted to retain the PHILOSOPHY and INSIGHTS of Christianity while editing out all of the physical, base and HUMAN aspects. Remember, they didn’t like the incarnation, they didn’t like the cross and they didn’t like the resurrection. That was all too CRASS, too PHYSICAL and too human. They wanted to rise above all that. They wanted to be SPIRITUAL.

And in the process these people came to believe that they were basically beyond the concerns of the body. F.F. Bruce puts it this way, he says:

“These new teachers claimed to have reached such an advanced stage in spiritual experience that they were ‘beyond good and evil’.”²

Now there appear to have been two different versions of this particular distortion. Some said a person could become so spiritual that they would no longer even FEEL the tug of the old flesh. They would achieve a state of moral perfection. Others said that there was really no need to even concern yourself with things done in the body, whether good or evil, since real religion was a matter of the SPIRIT.

You can hear John pushing back on both:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8 ESV)

² F.F. Bruce, *The Gospels & Epistles Of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 26.

If you deny that you have a sin nature – if you deny that there are contrary desires at war with your soul – then you're not a Christian. The truth is not in you.

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:10 ESV)

And if you say that nothing you do IS SIN because it only happens in the body, then you are definitely not a Christian because you are making God a liar. Why would Jesus have died on the cross FOR YOUR SINS – if your sins do not matter?

They do matter. And if you really knew God, then you would know that.

God is light. And if you walk with him – then you hate your sin. That's implication #1.

All real believers despise and renounce their sin.

They can't tolerate it – they hate it - so whenever they do sin, they make a bee line for the cross. They need that sin obliterated. They want it cast into the sea – as far as the east is from the west – so far they want their sin removed from them – and they know exactly where to go to get it. They go to the cross – that's what John says in chapter 1 verses 7 and 9.

Does that sound like you?

Well then, good news! You are a Christian!

But if you don't do that – if you've learned to live with your sin, if you've made peace with it – then you aren't saved. A real Christian is walking in the LIGHT and as a result they hate and renounce their sin.

The second implication is this. If you are a real Christian, if you are walking in the light, then:

2. You will obey God

That's where John goes next. Look at verse 3 of chapter 2:

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴ Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. ⁷ Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. ⁸ At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. ⁹ Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. ¹⁰ Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. ¹¹ But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (1 John 2:3–11 ESV)

God is LIGHT – his ways are right, therefore if you are walking with God then you are trusting his decisions and his judgments. That's the mark of a true believer. Look at verse 6:

whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2:6 ESV)

Now remember these heretics thought that they were beyond good and evil. They said that they knew God – in fact they said that they knew God better than everybody else – but they simultaneously claimed that they weren't terribly concerned about their moral behaviour. Their philosophy was: love God and do what you like.

But that's nonsense, John says. If you truly know God – then you will do what he likes. In fact you will trust what HE LIKES far more than you trust what you like. Because he is the LIGHT and his ways are PURE and RIGHTEOUS ALTOGETHER.

According to John, to be in right relationship with God is to be characterized by a genuine concern for his commandments.

Now where do you suppose he got that?

He got it from Jesus. Jesus said:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46 ESV)

If a person is unconcerned for the commandments of God – they are not a Christian. Plain and simple.

Now, as a pastor I realize that this point needs to be made with sensitivity. A real Christian will obey God – YES! That is true – that is what the text says, but let’s go back and read 1 John 1:8:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8 ESV)

So according to that text, everyone is a sinner. You are a sinner. I am a sinner. Go ahead and look at the person beside you, point your finger at them and say: You are a sinner.

We’re all sinners. No one is perfect – but what John is saying here is that if you are a Christian then the commandments of God are going to matter to you. You’re going to trust them. You are going to want to walk in that path. You are going to stumble – yes. You are going to miss the odd turn – yes! But you are going to be committed to the path. Every real Christian is – so if you’re not, then you’re not. That’s what John is saying.

The third implication is this. If you are a real Christian, if you are walking in the light, then:

3. You will reject worldliness

John starts making that point at verse 12 of chapter 2. He says:

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men,

because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. 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 of life—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 2:12–17 ESV)

Once you come into the light you can never look at things in the dark in quite the same way. You can't laugh at what you used to laugh at. You can't live for what you used to live for. You see the world differently now. You see the world through the LENS OF LIGHT.

C.S. Lewis said famously,

“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”³

That's what Jesus meant when he said:

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4 ESV)

You see all true children of the kingdom mourn – they look at the world and they are sad. They are heartbroken over the values, over the destructive behaviours, over the godless pursuits, over the awful trajectory that it is on. They see things the way they are now and therefore they are urgent in their mission.

Put simply, my friends, if you are loving life, if you are enjoying this world, if you are accumulating pleasures and experiences, and buying in to what this world is selling – then you are not a Christian. You've obviously never seen the light – because you are obviously not seeing everything else in this world through the LENS of that light.

Worldliness – is a sure sign of unconversion.

³ C.S. Lewis in *Is Theology Poetry*.

The final implication that John unpacks is this. If you are a real Christian, if you are walking in the light, then:

4. You will keep the faith

He makes that point in the last half of chapter 2. Look at verse 18:

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. 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. ²⁰ But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. ²¹ I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. ²² Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴ Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life. ²⁶ I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. ²⁷ But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him. ²⁸ And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. ²⁹ If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him. (1 John 2:18–29 ESV)

So here John says that anyone who leaves the real Gospel behind is not a Christian. Anyone who denies that JESUS IS THE CHRIST is not a real Christian.

Remember, these proto-Gnostics did not like the idea that the Word became FLESH. They didn't like the idea of the incarnation. So they came up with an alternative system. They said that Jesus of Nazareth was just a guy – a holy guy for sure – but just a guy. And then at his baptism – the WORD – the CHRIST SPIRIT – came upon him – and that's why he was saying all this amazing stuff – the stuff we want to hold on to. But then, just before he died – the CHRIST SPIRIT left him – and it was only Jesus of Nazareth who died on the cross. And he stayed dead. The Christ

Spirit though, now lives in heaven, having tasted as it were, for a season, the experience of humanity.

That's what they were saying. And John says that anybody who says that is not a Christian. If you change the details of the Gospel, you are not a Christian. Therefore:

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life. (1 John 2:24–25 ESV)

Real Christians are holding their ground. They have seen the light; they know the truth and they will not be lured into defection.

Now, perhaps you are wondering why we are bothering with this old text. What is the relevance of this to our day? Well if you have read the Revelation of John then you know that the Apostle believed that under pressure – under tribulation and trial – eventually every human being on planet earth would eventually be driven into one of two camps; either the camp of the Lamb or the camp of the Beast. John's basic premise is that under pressure people reveal who they are.

And so he tells us at the end of the letter – that he has written this epistle **THAT WE MAY KNOW.**

That we know where we are headed and to whom we presently belong.

You see in times of peace and prosperity the sheep and the goats intermingle and it can be very hard to tell one from the other. But under pressure people reveal who they are. So this letter is intended to help us identify who we are in advance of final judgment. We are supposed to examine ourselves and to look for inclination, direction and tendency.

You should be asking yourself:

Do I look like a child of the light?

Do I hate my sin? Or have I made peace with it?

Do I trust the Word of God? Or do I trust the consensus of culture?

Do I mourn over the world? Or do I love it?

Am I persevering in the faith? Or am I drifting away?

Those are the questions being posed by this text. May God grant us the courage to deal honestly with what we see. Let's pray together.