
THE BOOK OF I JOHN

Lesson Three

True Christians Believe the Gospel, Obey God's Commandments, and Love Their Brethren

“My little children, these things write I unto you, that you sin not, and if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. And hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He that saith, I know Him, and keeps not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keeps His word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in Him. He that saith he abides in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked. Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you have heard from the beginning. Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in Him and in you: because the darkness is past, and the true light now shines. He that says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loves his brother abides in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hates his brother is in darkness, and walks in darkness, and knows not whither he goes, because that darkness has blinded his eyes. I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake. I write unto you, fathers, because you have known Him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because you have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because you have known Him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.” **I John 2:1-14**

As we embark upon this section, we must keep before our thinking that John is doing hand-to-hand combat with the pre-gnostic teachers who had left the church, and set up a rival church. They had rejected the apostolic gospel and had returned to the world of Grecian philosophy. They believed God had given them new light or knowledge which superseded or replaced that of the apostles. They were saying that one had to embrace this new knowledge in order to have a true fellowship with God. This knowledge consisted of believing that all physical matter was evil, while that which was spiritual was good. Thus God could not have incarnated Himself in a true human body. This led to a denial of both the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ. They also had a low view of the seriousness of sin by believing that one's moral conduct in the body did not affect one's spiritual fellowship with God.

John denounced such false teaching by reaffirming the true deity and true humanity of Jesus in 1:1-4. Then in 1:5-10, he went on to establish that fellowship with God requires confession of one's sinfulness in repentance and availing ourselves of Christ's cleansing blood.

God's Solution For Man's Sin - 2:1,2

“My little children, these things write I unto you, that you sin not, and if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”

In verse one, John lists two reasons he is writing to his flock, who are very dear unto him. First, he is writing them to exhort them not to commit a single act of sin. The verb is in the aorist tense meaning individual acts of sin, and not that of a habitual lifestyle like that of the false teachers. While it is wrong to claim that “we have no sin” or that “we have not sinned,” John did not wish to give his readers the idea that sin can be regarded as a natural occurrence in the Christian life lived in the body. Instead the main goal or ideal of the Christian life is to not sin, like the model provided us by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, he is writing to comfort and reassure them that when a believer does sin, God has provided a way for believers to respond to it. In the words ***“if any man sin”*** the verb is in the aorist tense revealing that John did believe that specific acts of sin are possible in a believer's life. Whenever the sinless ideal is not met, the solution is found in Jesus Christ who is presented in three roles. The first is that of an ***“advocate.”*** The word describes a defense attorney as one ***“who speaks in our defense.”*** When a believer sins, Christ pleads his case to God the Father who serves as the Judge in the case.

In His second role as the ***“righteous one,”*** Jesus can take care of our case in a just and righteous manner. Now what does our sinless or righteous representative plead? It is not a plea of innocence or even a plea of mercy. Instead it is a plea that rests upon His own righteousness, and seeks forgiveness from the Judge on the basis of His sinless life. The third role of Christ is that in His atoning sacrifice, He has satisfied the wrath of God against the guilty party. This act of propitiation renders God favorable toward the sinner. The sin is thus canceled out by the action involved. Thus Jesus is both the advocate and the atoning sacrifice. What He pleads on behalf of sinners is what He Himself has done on their behalf.

Since Jesus bore the penalty for all kinds of sins which the members of Adam's race are capable of committing. Not only can He pardon the sins of believers, but also the sins of any member of Adam's world who will confess his sins in repentance, and ask to be forgiven on the basis of Christ's death. So while there is an infinite sufficiency in Christ's death to forgive all the sins committed by men, the saving efficiency is designed for

believers only. Jesus paid the sin debt only for those who ultimately believe. Those who die in unbelief must pay the price of their own sin debt. Thus John could say in John 3:36, **“He that believes on the Son has everlasting life: and he that believes not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abides on him.”** So while there is enough light in Jesus to lighten every man that comes into the world (John 1:9), the light is efficacious only for those who come to the light. Likewise by virtue of His infinite sacrifice, Jesus has the ability to pardon the sins of Adam’s race, but He has decreed to only pardon the sins of those who repent and believe. So let whosoever is willing to confess their need of Christ, come to Christ and embrace the promise of a faithful God to enact a just and righteous pardon. This is God’s solution for man’s sinning. True Christians believe the Gospel.

C. S. Lewis makes this observation:

“Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore, has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people who do not know that they need any forgiveness. It is after you have realized that there is a real Moral Law, and Power behind that law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power - it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk. When you are sick, you will listen to the doctor.” (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 38, 39).

Obeying God’s Commands - 2:3-8

“And hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He that saith, I know Him, and keeps not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keeps His word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in Him. He that saith he abides in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked. Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you have heard from the beginning. Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in Him and in you: because the darkness is past, and the true light now shines.”

In verses 3-6, John presents a moral test to identify a true Christian. Its focus is upon a person’s behavior. It is a test of obedience to the commandments of God. The test is simple. The distinctive characteristic of a child of God is that he obeys God’s commands. This is a ground for assurance that we know that we know Him. John’s opponents claimed a monopoly on religious knowledge that John denied with his bold assertion “we know him.”

The concept of the knowledge of God appears here in the letter for the first time. Up until now John has described the Christian's relationship to God in terms of fellowship with Him. He now expresses it in terms of the knowledge of God. Fellowship and knowledge are synonyms, and refer to the same thing. The knowledge of God entails an intimate acquaintance with Him. The sign of possessing this saving knowledge of God is obedience to His commands. When the prophet Hosea complained there was no knowledge of God in the land, he immediately said there is **"swearing, lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery."** (Hosea 4:1). To know God thus involves knowledge of His character and requirements, and obedience to these requirements.

When John says, **"we know him,"** he uses the perfect tense that describes a past experience having continuing results. This describes a believer who has come to know God and still retains this personal relationship because of his initial encounter with God. Such a relationship can be tested by looking for consistent obedience to God's commands.

John, then proceeds to issue a warning to any who claim to know God, and yet do not live a life of consistent obedience to God. Those who were saying they knew Him were the same false teachers who claimed to have fellowship with God back in 1:6. The expression **"he that saith"** is the first of three statements in which John will emphasize the importance of joining one's Christian profession with one's Christian practice. The two others are found in verses 6 and 9. They are related to the expression **"if we say"** which John has used back in 1:6, 8, 10. These apostates, who have left the church, have failed the test of moral obedience, and are deceived and deceiving others, and are not true Christians. In contrast, those who keep God's word give evidence that their love for God is matured and complete.

This gives assurance of being in God (v. 5). To be in God means to display His moral character. And the character of God is not something about which we are left to speculate. God incarnate lived on earth. The character of the invisible God has been manifested in the conduct of the visible Christ. Jesus' earthly life can be summarized in the words found in Acts 10:38, **"who went about doing good."** The expression **"abides in him"** is probably a reference to Jesus' teaching on Himself being the vine, and the believers being the branches, who must continually abide in Him. (John 15). A believer's behavior should resemble that of Christ's. In I John 5:3 we read, **"For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments."** The test of our religious experience is whether it produces a reflection of the life of Jesus in our daily life. If it does not, then it is false and we fail the test.

In verses 7-11, John introduces the social test of true apostolic Christianity, namely that of love for God, which he has referred to back in verse 5 and love for our brother in verse 10. In contrast to the "new" teaching,

which the pre-Gnostic teachers had introduced into the church, John asserts that his teaching was not new but was the original commandment which had been given by Christ at the beginning of the Christian era. The word “new” means “new in kind, novel.” John was saying that he was not teaching a new novel commandment but was repeating standards of conduct which believers had known ever since their introduction to Christianity. While John does not state what the old commandment was, it would be known by all as being the commandment of Jesus, **“that we love one another.”** (II John 5).

In these verses, John introduces the concept of an old/new commandment, making a potentially confusing play on words. The one command is at the same time both old and new. The command is to love one another. It is old in one sense, it is new in another. It is old in that it was taught in the law of Moses (Leviticus 19:18, Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus summarized the entirety of the teachings found in the law and the prophets as love to God, and love for one’s neighbor. (Matthew 22:37-40).

In another sense the love commandment was new. It became new when Jesus revealed it afresh in the upper room. He called it a new commandment. **“A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another.”** (John 13:34). And it was new because by His own fulfillment of it, He was giving it a depth of meaning that it had not possessed before. He went on to say, **“as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another.”**

Jesus had just washed the feet of His disciples showing that true love is self-giving to others, as opposed to self-receiving from others. It is the greater humbling himself to serve the lower. It is God humbling Himself to become a man and serving the lower creature, even sinful man. **“Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God should die for me!”** Whenever this love is manifested in Christians, men will know they are living the life of Jesus in them.

This new commandment inaugurates the new age of the Gospel. Jesus, the true light to show men how to love, is now shining in His people. The old age of darkness and selfishness is now passing away and the new age of love for others is now shining more and more unto that perfect age to come.

Loving The Brethren - vs. 9-11

“He that says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loves his brother abides in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hates his brother is in darkness, and walks in darkness, and knows not whither he goes, because that darkness has blinded his eyes.”

In verses 9 through 11, John now condemns the false teachers for their lack of love for the brotherhood of believers. They had separated themselves from the apostolic believers. John describes this as manifesting hatred or unconcern for their brothers and was causing confusion and a stumbling block to others. In spite of the great light they believed they had been shown, they were still in the darkness of sin and ignorance. They had betrayed the cause of Christ and like it was said of Judas in his betrayal, **“He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night.”** Darkness in the soul cannot love the true Jesus and His disciples, namely those who embrace apostolic doctrine and practice self-giving love.

How does John understand hate? Is it in an abstract theory or in concrete acts. John would answer that love is what one does. Hate is the absence of the deeds of love. To walk in the light is to love one’s brother, and this love will express itself in concrete actions. When these are absent, hate is present. Hate is the failure to deny oneself, the unwillingness to lay down one’s life for a brother. (John 15:13). It considers its own interests first (1 Corinthians 13:5); disregards the suffering and afflicted (Luke 10:30-37); despises the little ones (Matthew 18:10); withholds the cup of cold water from the thirsty (Matthew 25:42); and makes no effort to welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, or help the sick (Matthew 25:43).

The term “brother” here refers to those who belong to the community of faith. It is not that John lacks concern for those outside the faith, rather, in this letter, he has the community of believers in view. Moreover, if a believer cannot love his brother, it is doubtful whether he can love his neighbor.

Assuring The Faithful - vs. 12-14

“I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake. I write unto you, fathers, because you have known Him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because you have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because you have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because you have known Him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.”

After giving a strong warning to the apostates who have left the faith, John now turns to his readers and gives them a threefold assurance of being in the orthodox faith. It is important to keep in mind that while John is identifying the counterfeit Christians, he is at the same time giving assurance to his readers that they make up the true Christian community. The false teachers were claiming that the ordinary believers did not really know God because they had not received the special knowledge of Him through direct mystical revelations.

In verses 12 - 14, John addresses three sets of readers: dear children, fathers, and young men. Some Bible students believe this to be a division based on physical, chronological age. Others think it is a division based on spiritual maturity. A third group, to which I belong find these interpretations inconsistent, since fathers is out of the expected sequence, being placed in the middle. Elsewhere in the letter, John refers to all of his readers as “children” (2:1, 28; 3:7, 18; 5:21). Instead, it is more reasonable to believe that each of the terms refers to all of John’s readers. They were all little or “dear” children. They were all “fathers”, and they were all “young men.”

Sometimes when a Bible author contrasts ages (young/old), he does so as a figure of speech to denote young, old, and everyone in between. The prophet Joel, quoted by Luke in Acts 2:28, speaks of old men dreaming dreams and young men seeing visions. This is a poetic way of saying that dreams and visions will be experienced by young, old, and everyone in between. If this principle of interpretation is applied to verses 12 - 14, then whatever is said of each age category is intended to be true for all believers.

If this is so, then John asserts that his readers, like little children, in their immaturity, have all experienced the forgiveness of sins for Jesus’ sake, and have known an intimate relationship with the Father. Then like fathers, in their maturity, they have all truly experienced fellowship with Christ who is the eternal God. Finally, like young men, in their strength, have all engaged in spiritual warfare and had overcome the evil one, and grown stronger because the word of God was living in them.

In summary, John has shown how the false teachers, who were deceived and attempting to deceive others, had failed the three tests of orthodox, apostolic Christianity. They had failed the doctrinal tests of correct beliefs. They had failed the moral tests of behavior, and they had failed the social test of love. They were not to be received as true Christians or brothers in the faith. This was seen in 2:1-11. But far from questioning the salvation of his readers, or expressing dissatisfaction with their spiritual growth, John seeks to reassure them of their salvation they have in the gospel of Christ. They have all experienced forgiveness of sins. They all have knowledge of God. And they all have victory in the spiritual battle. **“Thanks be unto God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”**