



Lesson 1 – Introduction

We often assume second generation Christians have it easy. We wrongly think that because those who have gone before and battled for the faith won great victories that it will be smooth sailing for those who come behind them. 1 John is a blunt reminder that nothing could be further from the truth.

1 John was written to the first ever second- and third-generation Christians. Probably written later in the life of the apostle John, the author of this short letter looks around and realizes he is one of the last of the first ever first-generation Christians. By this point Christianity has already survived several onslaughts of persecution, with more on the way. The church has gone from being a start up movement with little realistic chance of success to a firmly entrenched movement with a growing network of churches, leaders, and communities. But the enemies of the faith haven't gone anywhere.

What are the enemies that are faced by the church today, especially second- and third-generation Christians?

There is still a world that constantly tugs at the heart of believers. There are false teachers who arising from within the church, sitting next to you in the pew one day and trying to lead you away from the teaching of Scripture the next. There are those who claim the title "Christian" while living lives that contradict everything God says. Until Christ returns, there is a war that every generation must fight, and the successes of the parents do not mean smooth sailing for the children. John writes his letter to encourage these believers – and us – to keep fighting for the faith and to give instruction on how we can know for certain what is true and how we should live.

Outline

Outlining the book of 1 John has caused theologians endless difficulty. The book doesn't fit into a nice, neat outline like modern interpreters would prefer. The reason for this is that there isn't one single, coherent line of argumentation that runs throughout the letter like there is with other New Testament letters, especially those by Paul. This does not mean that John is disorganized, only that his organization doesn't follow one thesis with a carefully designed set of arguments that build on each other in support of that thesis. John's letter is more like a series of individual lessons. The messages of these lessons overlap with others various points, but they are all slightly

different in their own way. These lessons aren't scattered randomly, but they often form their own little subunit that normally flows into the next subunit, which flows into the next, and so forth.

Background

Most commentators would put the writing of 1 John sometime between A.D. 85-95. If Jesus died roughly around A.D. 30, then that would mean that Christianity had been around for about 60 years. Most of the apostles had died off. Many of the important, founding leaders of Christianity had died off. A new generation arose and was entrusted the gospel, and as the elderly John looks at the state of the church, he has some loving parental concerns for this new group. John's letter doesn't give us many concrete details, but if it was written near the same time as 2 and 3 John and if it addresses the same types of situations, then several problems seem to be plaguing the church.

The community John is writing to seems to be facing the problem of false teaching that had arisen from within its own ranks (1 John 2:18-19). In 2 John, the author is concerned about people in the church showing hospitality to heretics. For this reason, John gives instructions about crucial doctrines that cannot be ignored, particularly concerning the incarnation of Christ. Not only are there false teachers, but there appear to be divisions within the young church. 3 John deals with an arrogant man named Diotrephes who refused to support genuine traveling preachers because he didn't want to share popularity. So John gives love for brothers as a sign of genuine conversion and hatred as a dead give away that someone is talking the talk but not walking the walk.

Which of these two dangers, false teachers and division in the body, do you think our church is more susceptible to?

In what ways might false teaching from within manifest itself today?

In what ways might division in the body manifest itself today?

Purposes

John has several purpose statements throughout his letter. On several occasions he will say something along the lines of "These things are written so that..."

Read the following verses: 1 John 1:4¹; 2:1, 26; 5:13

¹ If you have people reading from a modern translation, 1 John 1:4 will read something along the lines of "so that *our* joy may be full" instead of "so that *your* joy may be full." The majority of Greek copies that we use have the KJV "your" in the Greek, while a few important early manuscripts have "our," which is what the modern

What would you summarize as John's main overarching goal or goals in writing this letter?

Themes

Since the background for the letter is less clearly defined and since the book focuses more on themes than it does on one single argument that runs throughout, paying careful attention to the themes that pop up repeatedly throughout the book is a helpful way to study the letter. Many of these themes are also important for the teaching of Jesus in John's gospel. After sixty years of meditating on his master's teaching, John writes his own inspired thoughts and this important teaching.

- **Dichotomies**

John loves dichotomies. As we like to say, he's black and white. As John would put it "There is light and darkness." Any study of 1 John is going to find itself repeatedly coming across these contrasts.

- **Love and Hatred**

John has a lot to say about the love of God, and how that love should flow into our lives as we seek to love others. He also has a lot to say about hatred, and how truly loving God is incompatible with hating fellow Christians.

- **Truth and Lies**

John spends a fair amount of time dealing with God's truth versus the lies that are out there. It can be easy to be deceived and even self-deceived, particularly those who think that they can claim right doctrine and live lives that contradict that doctrine.

- **Life and Death**

John sets up for his readers a choice between life and death. The choices we make, and what we do with Jesus, will ultimately set us up for eternal life with God or death far from his presence. Life is found with God, and those who refuse to walk in the light, keep God's commands, and love the brothers will not have life.

- **Light and Darkness**

John begins the letter with the challenge to live walking as the light, as God is in the light. This requires that his children walk in the light by following his commands, rather than sinning and breaking his commands.

translations follow. John does describe Jesus as giving his teaching so that "your joy may be full" (John 16:24), but in 2 and 3 John the author lets his readers know that their living right brought him joy (2 John 4, 12; 3 John 3-4). The general nature of the opening in 1 John, however, as well as the large amount of manuscripts, including important early manuscripts provides a strong case for the KJV rendering.

Why do you think John uses so many different contrasts throughout his book?

Which of these dichotomies personally speaks to you the strongest? Which one do you find sticks in your brain and helps you see God's truth in a way that changes how you live?

- **The Believer's Enemies**

John wants believers the next generation of Christianity to know that they are up against some formidable foes. Throughout the book, he repeatedly highlights several villains that we must constantly be on the lookout for.

See how many of these your group can think of on their own before you give them the blank.

- **False Teachers**

John is concerned about a new teaching that has been spreading among the believers. This teaching seems to deny the humanity of Christ (1 John 4:2). This would line up with a teaching that was starting to become prominent during this time called Gnosticism, which basically taught that matter was evil and spirit was good. Because of this, Jesus was seen by some of these heretics as a spiritual apparition, for a good, holy man like Jesus couldn't have had a sinful body. These teachers, as we saw earlier, had arisen in some cases from within the churches themselves and caused great confusion. John gives clear doctrinal guidance and warns Christians to stay far away from them and their heresy.

What are some of the more dangerous false teachings in the church today? How should we as believers respond to these challenges?

- **The World**

Even before social media, Hollywood, or pop music bombarded God's people and sought to pull their hearts away from God, John felt the need to warn these second- and third-generation Christians to stay away from the world. Even in first-century Rome, where running water was cutting edge technology, believers found themselves tempted to love the world and the things in the world, while forgetting that the world was opposed to God.

In what ways today do believers face the pull of the world?

- **Satan**

Many believers today are practicing materialists.² They say they believe in spiritual forces but if you look at their day to day lives, it might be hard to tell. John sees Satan as real and active and a force to be reckoned with in his first letter to this group.

What difference does it make in the life of a believer to take seriously the presence of Satan and demons?

How should we respond to the reality of the supernatural?

- **Certain Knowledge**

Much of the book of John is written to give knowledge about the gospel that is accurate and certain. The false teaching that had come from those within the church, as well as the confusion of watching people profess one thing and live another way had led many to be uncertain about the faith and about their personal salvation. John wrote this letter to give clear, objective standards whereby someone could know that they are living by God's Word and were following the right teaching.

What types of things can cause confusion in our churches today? How can we go about addressing those areas of confusion?

The letter of 1 John brims with both concern and hope, encouragement and warning. John strikes an impressive balance between instructing the believers about the dangers they face while also giving them much to hope for and be excited about. In this short, simple letter John wrestles with the great issues we all face on a daily basis – How do I know that I'm truly God's child? What do I do when I sin? How can I be sure about what God's Word says?

In doing this he lays out for all of us basic, key truths of Christianity that we can sometimes mistakenly think we've moved past. God wants us to keep his commands. God wants us to love him and others. We must beware the world and those who bring false doctrine. As John cycles through these themes and looks at them from different angles and in different combinations, he creatively and effectively impresses on our hearts the very essence of Christianity and following Jesus – loving God and loving others. John comes to second- and third-generation Christians with the reminder that no matter how well we might know the faith, we always need to be brought back to the basics, and it's these basics we will be saturated with over the remainder of this study.

² Materialist in the philosophical sense meaning someone who believes that the universe is entirely physical, with no supernatural element involved, rather than materialist in the common sense of someone who buys too many things.

Why do many believers feel like they've "graduated" from the basics of things like keeping God's commands and loving as they ought?

What happens when that kind of an attitude develops within us?

How can we prevent such an attitude from taking root?