



Lesson 2 – Fellowship with God and Others

1 John 1:1-2:6

More than perhaps any other writer of Scripture, John had time to sit and let the ideas and teachings of Jesus sink in. For sixty years John spent every day meditating on his teacher's words and seeing them shape and reshape his life. In the opening verses of 1 John, John the apostle lays out what he thinks his readers most need to hear. He summarizes for us the message of his letter, which is designed to be a summary of the teaching of Jesus.

As you scan the first few verses of 1 John, how do you think John summarizes the teachings of Jesus?

What words and phrases do you see showing up repeatedly in the first chapter of this book? How do you think John will develop these themes?

I. The Purpose for 1 John – how to have fellowship and joy (1 John 1:1-4)

We live in the age of information. Yet even though we have information everywhere we turn, our culture still finds itself unsure with who and what it can trust. In ancient times, the most trusted testimony came from eyewitnesses. One author notes “...ancient historians, considering that only the history of times within living memory could be adequately researched and recounted, valued above all the historian's own direct participation in the events about which he wrote... but also, as second best, the reminiscences of living witnesses who could be questioned in person by the historian...”¹ In John's opening prologue to his letter he is emphasizing in the strongest possible terms that what he is recounting is not secondhand information that he heard from someone else, but his own personal experience with Jesus.

What other passages does the opening line of 1 John remind you of? Why do you think John wrote this way?

In this opening, John clearly states his credentials and then moves on to discuss his message and his purpose for writing.

¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 24.

A. The author of this letter (1:1, 3a).

Some debate who exactly it was that wrote the letter of 1 John. Nowhere in the letter itself does the author identify himself, and so we must turn elsewhere for the answer. Church tradition has almost universally ascribed the authorship of this letter to the apostle John, one of Christ's twelve disciples. This testimony is strengthened when the letter is compared with the gospel of John, which claims to be written by "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:20-24). When we compare the other times this character shows up in the gospel (John 13:23-30; 19:26; 20:1-10), it really seems that this character was one of the 12.² For these reasons this study will assume that John the disciple of Jesus wrote 1-3 John, Revelation, and the gospel of John.

What do we know about John from the gospels?

In what ways is the John we meet in 1 John different? In what ways is he the same?

How does knowing John's background impact our understanding of the gospel?

B. The content of this letter (1:2).

The content of this letter is what has been seen and heard that is then communicated to the believing community. In particular, it would seem that John has the teaching of Jesus in mind. Much of this letter is similar in nature to the teaching of Jesus we find in the gospels, particularly the gospel of John. John sees himself, then, as one who is proclaiming again the message of love and truth and obedience that he first heard for Jesus. And he is doing so in order that...

C. The goal of the letter (1:3b-4).

John writes a purpose statement here with two goals in mind.

What two goals do you see in these verses?

1. John wanted his readers to have fellowship with Christians and God.

John begins by encouraging his readers to follow his teaching because in doing so it brings them into fellowship with him and other believers, as well as bringing them into fellowship with God himself (cf 1:6).

What is fellowship? Fellowship is one of those words we often throw around without giving much thought to. Too often it can be an old-timey word that we use in a Christian context and not really think about. One author describes this word as "relationship...partnership...communion with others...sharing material possessions."³

² Some still argue that John the elder was different than John the apostle, and that the author of John, 1-3 John, and Revelation was a close follower of Jesus but was not one of the 12. While this is possible, it seems unlikely.

³ The main section headings in chapter 1 of *True Community* by Jerry Bridges, pages 9-17. Bridges' book is essentially a word study on the Greek word for fellowship (*koinonia*) and is well worth the read.

While a full word study is beyond the scope of this lesson, perhaps a description of what the Bible means by this word can be borrowed from Jerry Bridges: “[Community relationship and partnership] are dimensions of koinonia as *sharing together*, [communion and sharing material possessions] as *sharing with one another*. It is because we share together a common life in Christ that we are called on to share with one another whatever we have, both spiritual and material resources.”⁴

What often comes into your mind when you hear the word “fellowship”? How might this be similar and how might it be different than what John meant by fellowship?

What does it mean to have fellowship with God?

2. John wanted his readers to have joy.

Although there is some question in modern translations as to whether John writes this so that “your joy may be full” or that “our joy may be full,” in either case the focus here is on joy.⁵ Jesus himself had said that keeping his commands would result in fellowship with God and in joy (cf John 15:9-11). As John will develop throughout the letter, true joy is found in keeping God’s commands and having fellowship with him.

How is joy different from and how is it similar to happiness? Why do you think it is that fellowship with God and Christians and obedience to God results in joy?

II. The Problem in 1 John – how to handle sin (1 John 1:5-2:2)

The goal of John in writing this letter was that believers would walk in fellowship with God and other Christians. But there is a problem that must be addressed. Sin will destroy our relationship with God and sin will destroy our relationship with each other.

A. We must not walk in sin (1 John 1:5-7).

John begins with the warning that God is light and there is no darkness in him. This may seem like an obvious statement, but it’s a tremendously profound one. By the time most people have become adults or been adults for a while, we stop being surprised when we find someone fails to meet our expectations or when we find cracks in their character. “No one is perfect” we remind ourselves. And yet there are no mistakes with God. No errors, no faults. For this reason, God expects us to walk in the light rather than in the darkness.

What do you think John means by “walking in the light” and “walking in darkness”?

⁴ *True Community*, 16

⁵ See the footnote in last week’s message for an explanation of these differences and an argument for the rendering in the KJV.

Since John will go on to clarify that no one is without sin, what do you think the difference is between walking in darkness and the sin that John is talking about in verses 8, 10?

What is the promise for those who walk in the light? What does it mean that those who walk in the light are cleansed of their sins?

B. We must admit and confess our sin (1 John 1:8-10).

Consistently living in sin will destroy our relationship with God. But so will the failure to deal with the sins we do commit despite our best efforts. John realizes his warnings about living a lifestyle of unrepented sin might lead some to act as though they never sin, perhaps they just make “mistakes.” John warns that such people are self-deceived and that we all need to be honest about our ongoing problem with sin and rather than ignore it, to come to God every time for cleansing and forgiveness.

How should believers respond when they are discouraged by their own sinfulness and feel like they have “worn out” 1 John 1:9?

What would you say to a believer who is concerned that they are sinning so much they must not really know God and can’t be saved?

C. We must trust Jesus to address our sin (1 John 2:1-2).

God’s cleansing of our sins should not encourage us to sin more. Rather it should keep us back from sin. Yet Scripture notes that Jesus is propitiation, or the appeasement of wrath for our sins, and not just for our sins but for the sins of the whole world. While this verse has become an incredibly volatile verse in the world of theology,⁶ the main point of John should not be lost in the weeds. John is saying that through the death of Christ there is forgiveness and cleansing for all our sins, and this sacrifice is sufficient not just for us, but for the entire world.

How does knowing that Jesus is the propitiation for our sins discourage our sinning rather than encouraging it?

⁶ Two almost entirely unrelated debates have unfolded around this verse. (1) The first is the meaning of “propitiation.” Some, especially those bothered by the idea that God would punish His Son or that God would be a God of wrath, try to argue that this word means “forgiveness.” They try to argue that there is no concept of God’s wrath in the idea, merely that sins have been forgiven. While this debate becomes quite complicated, good reasons exist for continuing to see “propitiation” as including the idea of turning away God’s wrath through a sacrifice (see, for example, Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John (Pillar New Testament Commentary)*, pages 75-76). (2) The other question this touches on is whether or not this passage teaches what is often called “unlimited atonement” (i.e. that Jesus died for the world rather than just the elect). While such a technical debate could fill up many pages in this footnote, it is probably best to simply acknowledge that Jesus’ sacrifice is sufficient to forgive every sin that has ever been committed, that Jesus’ sacrifice is of no use if there is no faith, and that Scripture does talk about some way in which Christ dies “for” the world, while distinguishing that this death alone does not save them apart from faith.

Throughout this whole section John is trying to strike a balance between encouraging us not to sin and yet encouraging us when we sin. John is wrestling with a tension all preachers wrestle with – how to preach the free grace and forgiveness of Christ in such a way that leads to greater holiness rather than a relaxed attitude toward sin. Sin is a part of our fallen condition until we are given glorified bodies (or “until we shall be like him” as John will later say cf 1 John 3:2), but if we want true fellowship with God and other Christians we must turn from a lifestyle of sin and address the sin that remains despite our best efforts.

III. The Practice of 1 John – how to keep God’s commands (1 John 2:3-6)

John has been warning about the negatives, things that will keep us from having fellowship with God and with other Christians. Now he moves to the positives, what we should be doing. Rather than walking in darkness, we should be keeping God’s commands. John here introduces the themes of “knowing” and “love,” both themes that will come to be very important throughout the rest of his letter.

A. Keeping God’s command demonstrates that we know God (2:3-4).

Many people claim to know God, but a quick look at their life will tell you otherwise. Such people, John argues, don’t really know God. A true knowledge of God will result in living in a way that God would live.

What about the problem of ongoing sin, as we mentioned earlier? How does that factor in?

Why do you think that a true knowledge of God will result in right living? What about people who know a lot of facts about God but live wicked lifestyles?

B. Keeping God’s commands means God’s love has been perfected (2:5).

The word “perfected” is a word that we will show up again in 1 John 4. It doesn’t necessarily mean “perfect,” as in no more possible room for improvement. Instead, it means that the God’s love has been brought to a point of maturity. God’s love wants to change and shape us, and as we allow it to that love matures us and the end result is that we keep God’s commands.

Why do you think it is that God’s love, when properly understood and applied, will result in us keeping God’s commands?

What would you say to someone who tried to use God’s love and grace as an excuse to continue on in sin?

Keeping God’s commands is a matter of knowing and loving God. Too often we think of obedience as simply something we are required to do. “Just do it,” is the mentality of many Christians. If you fail, try harder! Yet John reminds us even in these opening verses that our

obedience goes deeper than “just do it.” Our obedience or lack thereof is a sign of our love and knowledge of God, or a lack of love and knowledge of God.

With this in mind, what should we do when continually find ourselves struggling to keep a command? How might this perspective alter our Bible reading and our spiritual growth?

John opens his letter by setting out his goals and getting us started on the way. He wants us to know how we can know we know God; he wants us to have joy and fellowship; and he wants us to know how to think rightly about sin. In just sixteen short verses John packs quite a punch, and throughout the rest of the letter he will continue to unfold and build on the ideas here introduces to the reader.

Which of these themes was most helpful to you, and why?

What is one way this week that you can reorient your thinking or change your behavior to line up with what John is here teaching?