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• EAST AFRICA •

# 1 JOHN

by

**Jonathan M. Menn**

**B.A., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1974**

**J.D., Cornell Law School, 1977**

**M.Div., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2007**

**Equipping Church Leaders East Africa, Inc.**

**714 S. Summit St., Appleton, WI 54914**

**+1-920-2846841 (mobile and WhatsApp)**

**jonathanmenn@yahoo.com**

**www.ecllea.net**

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1 John was probably written between AD 85 to the early 90s. The author is not named, but early-on was attributed to the apostle John. Various commonalities with the Gospel of John corroborate this identification. 1 John addresses false teaching that evidently had been taking place in the church. The book calls on the people to believe that Jesus is the Christ who has come in the flesh. This belief is to be demonstrated by obeying his commandments, which is manifested in our lives in two ways: living lives of righteousness and lives of love. The word “love” (*agapē*) is used more times in this book (18) than in any other book in the NT. Our responsibilities to believe and live lives of righteousness and love stem from God’s own nature as light, as righteous, and as love. By believing in Christ and demonstrating this belief by living lives of righteousness and love, we show that we know him, and we will have assurance of eternal life. These assurances are not based on our personal conduct, but on the finished work of Christ; our conduct is evidence of our being transformed by Christ, which, in turn, indicates that God is working in us.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**I. Introduction.....2**  
**A. *The Author*.....2**  
**B. *Date and themes*.....2**  
**C. *Structure and outline*.....2**

**II. Commentary on 1 John.....3**  
**A. *Salutation (1:1-4)*.....3**  
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....4**  
**B. *Walking in Light (1:5–2:14)*.....4**  
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....12**  
**C. *Abiding in Truth (2:15–4:6)*.....13**  
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....22**  
**D. *Walking in Love (4:7–5:3)*.....23**  
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....27**  
**E. *Overcoming the World (5:4-13)*.....28**  
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....30**  
**F. *Closing Instructions and Exhortations (5:14-21)*.....30**  
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....36**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY.....36**

**THE AUTHOR.....38**

## I. Introduction

### A. *Author and date*

The identity of the author of 1 John is not named. Early church fathers, beginning with Irenaeus (c. 130-202) named the apostle John as the author; no other author was ever suggested in antiquity. There are a number of commonalities, both in subject matter and wording, with the Gospel of John, which suggest that they were both written by the same author. He begins by saying “*What was from the beginning*” (1:1), which reflects the beginning of the Gospel of John, “*In the beginning*” (John 1:1). The author claims to be an eyewitness concerning the “*Word of Life*” (1:1-3; 4:14). His status as an eyewitness suggests that he was an apostle who was with Jesus. That is further indicated by his use of the Greek *Logos* (“Word”) which is also what Jesus is called in John 1:1. His statement in 4:2 that “*every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God*” parallels the statement in John 1:14 that “*the Word became flesh.*” Thus, one can reasonably infer that the author was, indeed, the apostle John.

The dating of the book is uncertain. Most commentators suggest that it was written somewhere from AD 85 to the early 90s.

### B. *Background and themes*

1 John and Hebrews are the only NT epistles that do not contain the formal epistolary salutation of first-century epistles, i.e., a statement of who the author is, who the recipients are, and words of greeting. Thus, the book is more of a sermon or didactic (teaching or instructive) meditation. Nevertheless, the personal and historical references and common ties the author shares with his readers suggest to many that this “was meant to be read as a pastoral letter to a congregation or to a number of congregations” (Carson and Moo 2005: 669). 1 John also contains no quotations from, and very few clear allusions to, the OT.

1 John addresses false teaching that evidently had been taking place in the church (2:18-19, 26; 3:7; 4:1-6). The book circles around three main themes and tests: It calls on the people to believe that Jesus is the Christ who has come in the flesh (2:22; 4:2-3; 5:1, 5)—the *truth-cognitive test*; to deny the Son is to deny the Father (2:23). This belief is to be demonstrated by obeying his commandments, which is manifested in our lives in two ways: living lives of righteousness (2:3-6, 29; 3:7; 5:2-3) and love (2:9-11; 3:18; 4:7). A life of righteousness is the *moral-behavioral test*; a person who does not obey God’s commands is a liar and does not know God but is of the devil (2:4; 3:8, 10). A life of love is the *social-affective/devotional test*; the person who does not love does not know God (3:10; 4:8). In fact, the word “love” (*agapē*, from the verb *agapaō*) is used more times in this book (18) than in any other book in the NT. The themes of belief, righteousness, and love recur throughout the book. Our responsibilities to believe and live lives of righteousness and love stem from God’s own nature as light (1:5), as righteous (1:9; 2:1, 29; 3:7), and as love (4:8, 16).

By believing in Christ and demonstrating this belief by living lives of righteousness and love, we show that we know him (2:3-6), and we will have assurance of eternal life (5:13). John Stott points out that these assurances are twofold: “objective (that the Christian religion is true) and subjective (that they themselves have been born of God and possess eternal life)” (Stott 1988: 56). These assurances are not based on our personal conduct, but on the finished work of Christ (2:2; 4:7); our conduct is evidence of our being transformed by Christ, which, in turn, indicates that God is working in us. The assurances John gives are reflected in the language he uses: 20 times he uses the word *ginōskō* (know or perceive) and 16 times he uses the word *eidō* (know).

### C. *Outline*

The book may be outlined as follows:

#### I. Prologue (1:1-4)

#### II. Walking in Light (1:5–2:14)

- 1:5-7—God is light, so we are to walk in the light
- 1:8-10—Sin, confession, and forgiveness
- 2:1-2—Jesus is our advocate and the propitiation of our sins
- 2:3-6—Keeping God’s word and commandments shows that we know him
- 2:7-8—The commandment is both old and new
- 2:9-11—Loving our brother shows that we are in the light
- 2:12-14—John’s reason for writing to us

### III. Abiding in Truth (2:15–4:6)

- 2:15-17—Our relationship with the world
- 2:18-24—The nature of antichrist
- 2:25-29—Abide in Christ
- 3:1-3—We are children of God
- 3:4-10—We are to be righteous
- 3:11-18—We are to love the brethren
- 3:19-24—We will have assurance from God
- 4:1-6—We are to believe in Jesus Christ

### IV. Walking in Love (4:7–5:3)

- 4:7-12—We are to love because God is love
- 4:13-16—We have assurance through the Holy Spirit
- 4:17-21—The perfection of God’s love in us
- 5:1-3—The tests of belief, love, and keeping God’s commands summarized

### V. Our faith in Christ overcomes the world and gives eternal life (5:4-13)

- 5:4-5—Through Christ we overcome the world
- 5:6-13—Our faith in Christ gives eternal life

### VI. Closing Instructions and Exhortations (5:14-21)

- 5:14-15—God hears our prayers according to his will
- 5:16-17—Sin not leading to death
- 5:18-21—Remain in Christ

## II. Commentary on 1 John<sup>1</sup>

### A. Prologue (1:1-4)

*<sup>1</sup> What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—<sup>2</sup> and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—<sup>3</sup> what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.*

This prologue consists of one long, complex sentence in the original Greek. There are several parallels between the beginning of this book and the **John 1:1-14**: both begin by referring to the “beginning”; both refer to the *Logos*; both discuss the eternal entering human history and being seen; both speak of Christ as the Father’s Son; both say that responding to Christ results in a new relationship with God (see Stott 1988: 72). Nevertheless, some contend that the “*Word of Life*” refers, not to Christ *per se*, but to the Gospel of Christ, since v. 1 begins with a neuter, not a personal, word (“What” or “That which”) and, unlike in the Gospel of John, the word *Logos* does not stand alone but is part of the phrase “*Word of Life*”; further, the emphasis throughout the book is on “life,” not on “Word” (Stott 1988: 73). On the other hand, Jesus is described as “*the way, the truth, and the life*” in **John 14:6**, and seeing, hearing, touching, and being manifested relate to Jesus. Further, the “*eternal life, which was with the Father*” must refer to Jesus. Indeed, Jesus himself defined eternal life as knowing God “*and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*” (**John 17:3**). In short, Jesus is the one who gives eternal life; he is the manifestation of that life; he is the manifestation, the incarnation, of the Gospel.

In these verses John emphasizes the reality of the Gospel as incarnated in Christ by repeating that it was “manifested” to him and the other apostles, and that they “saw” and “heard” it personally. As a result, he repeats that he “proclaims” it to his readers. The purpose of his proclamation is “*so that you too may have fellowship with us.*” But this fellowship is not merely with the apostles, because their fellowship “*is with the Father, and with his son Jesus Christ.*” Consequently, when we take the Gospel and Jesus Christ into us, our fellowship will

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the New American Standard Bible (1995) will be used in this commentary.

also be with the Father and with Jesus Christ. The basic idea of fellowship (Greek = *koinonia*) is communion or having something in common. In this case, it is the eternal life which Christ brings which binds us together and also binds us to God. These verses unfold God's purpose in six stages: it has existed eternally; it then became manifested at a point in time historically; it was then experienced by people; those who experienced the Gospel of Christ then authoritatively proclaimed it; this results in communal fellowship by all those who partake of Christ; the result of that is complete joy.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. In all other religions, the founders did not claim to be God but told their followers what they were supposed to believe and do. What is the significance of the incarnation of Christ, and how does that make Christianity different from all other religions?
2. What is the Gospel?
3. Discuss the importance of fellowship among believers. How should this fellowship be manifested?

#### **B. *Walking in Light* (1:5–2:14)**

- **1:5-7—God is light, so we are to walk in the light**

*<sup>5</sup> This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; <sup>7</sup> but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

John begins by authenticating that the message he is proclaiming comes directly from Jesus Christ. The message is based on the nature of God: he is light. John Stott points out, “Intellectually, light is truth and darkness ignorance or error. Morally, light is purity and darkness evil.” (Stott 1988: 76) Here, the moral aspect of light is emphasized. The fact that God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all, has a necessary implication for us and how we live. In his Gospel, John had said, “*This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil*” (**John 3:19**). In short, how we live our lives shows what we really believe and what is most important to us.

Christianity is holistic. It is not simply a matter of believing certain things. Rather, one's beliefs must affect—and do affect—how one lives. How we live affects our relationship with the Lord. These verses are telling us that “actions speak louder than words.” This is made clear in **vv. 6-7**. People may “say” that they are saved or have fellowship with the Lord, but if they “*walk in darkness*,” i.e., if their deeds are evil, that demonstrates that their profession of faith is a lie. On the other hand, “*if we walk in the light*,” i.e., if we live in relationship with the Lord and according to the truth, we will be free from sin and be in right relationship with other people.

This is clear when we think of the properties of light. For example, the light of the sun enables life to exist and things to grow; it warms and comforts people; it enables people to see where they are going and where they should go; it exposes dangers that may be hidden in the darkness. Our lives should be similar: we should cause others to grow in faith and righteousness; we should comfort the sick and the grieving; we should expose evils and dangers that others may face. Thus, our walking in the light of the truth of the gospel is practical and will positively affect the lives of the people we have influence over or come in contact with.

- **1:8-10—Sin, confession, and forgiveness**

*<sup>8</sup> If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.*

To “*walk in the darkness*” exposes the fact that a person's profession of faith in and fellowship with Christ is a lie. Some Christians focus on their new birth—the fact that they have “*passed out of death into life*” (**John 5:24**) and are “*new creatures*” in Christ (**2 Cor 5:17**)—to conclude that, therefore, they no longer sin.

However, the fact is that no one in this life is fully “*conformed to the image of [Jesus Christ]*” (**Rom 8:29**). Everyone is born with the power of indwelling sin in him- or herself (**Rom 7:14-24**). When we come to Christ and are born again, God does not remove the power of indwelling sin from us. We still carry that power of sin inside of us and will continue to carry it as long as we are in this life. Although we have the power of indwelling sin in us, God has given us a greater power—the Holy Spirit—who also comes and lives inside of us (**John 14:17**). He also gives us a new heart (**Ezek 36:26**) and the mind of Christ (**1 Cor 2:16**). By drawing on the heart and mind of Christ, the Spirit gives us the ability to not sin and will cause us to walk in the ways of the Lord (**Ezek 36:27**). He is active and works in us to conform us to his image (**Phil 2:13**). Yet we are also to be an active part of the process of becoming Christlike: we must actively “*work out our salvation*” (**Phil 2:12**) by “*laying aside the old self*” and “*putting on the new self*” (**Eph 4:22-24**).

The presence of indwelling sin in all of us is reflected in the wording of **v. 8**, which speaks of “having sin,” as opposed to simply committing sinful acts. Sin is a principal, a power, a “law” (**Rom 7:23**) which remains in us at all times, even when we are not committing sinful acts. We need to recognize not only that the principal-power-law of sin is inside of us and remains in us, but also that it is active within us. The power of sin affects all aspects of our being: our thoughts, our feelings and emotions, our desires, our speech, and our actions. We cannot take this lightly by thinking that people are “basically good” or by saying something like “to err is human.”

The comprehensive nature of the power of indwelling sin led James to say, “*Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.*” (**Jas 1:13-14**) The word translated as “lust” in **v. 14** is *epithumia*. Although the word “lust” often has a sexual meaning, that is not its primary meaning here. *Epithumia* basically means to “desire greatly, strong desire, longing”; particularly when used in a bad sense it means “irregular and inordinate desire, appetite, lust” (Zodhiates 1993: “*epithumia*,” 627). In essence, James is telling us that we always and only do *what we most desire*. For example, if our employer tells us that we have to lie about something or we will lose our job, if we lie it is not because we were “forced against our will” to lie but because we desired to keep our job rather than be a person of integrity and tell the truth. If, during the genocide in Rwanda, we were told to kill someone and if we did not do so then we ourselves would be killed, if we killed the person it is because we desired to live more than we desire to obey God’s command, “*You shall not murder*” (**Exod 20:13**). This pattern has been the case since the very first human beings (Adam and Eve) committed the very first sin (eating the forbidden fruit): When Eve “*saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate*” (**Gen 3:6**). In other words, they desired to eat the fruit for the benefits they thought they would get more than they desired to trust and obey God. That always is the way. We commit specific sins because we want to; we want to because we have the principal-power-law of sin already inside us.

**Verses 8-9** also follow the pattern of **vv. 6-7**: the first verses of these couplets state the negative, and the second verses of the couplets state the remedy. With respect to confessing, note that John speaks of confessing “*our sins*,” not just our inherent sinfulness. His wording is emphasizing that we need to confess our specific sins. With respect to God’s forgiving us when we confess our sins, he is “faithful” to forgive us because he is faithful to his covenant. In the New Covenant, God promised, “*I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more*” (**Jer 31-34**). Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant on the cross (see **Luke 22:20**). However, **v. 9** also says that he is “righteous” to forgive our sins. The word translated as “righteous” is *dikaios*, which means “right, just. . . . It refers to the one who acts conformably to justice and right without any deficiency or failure.” (Zodhiates 1993: *dikaios*, 457) What John is saying here is important: When we confess our sins, God does not forgive us simply because he is merciful; instead, he forgives us as a matter of *justice*. How can that be? The answer takes us to the cross. When Jesus died on the cross, he took our sins upon himself. As **2 Cor 5:21** says, “*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.*” Jesus’ rising from the dead and then ascending back to the Father demonstrated that the Father accepted his sacrifice on our behalf. As John Stott says, “The cross is, in fact, the only moral ground on which he can forgive sin at all, for there the blood of Jesus his Son was shed that he might be ‘the atoning sacrifice for our sins’” (Stott 1988: 83). In other words, there was a price to pay for our sin, and Jesus paid it. The Father accepted Jesus’ payment on our behalf. Therefore, it would be unjust for the Father to require that we pay, again, for that which has already been paid.

The cross is also implied in the statement that he “*cleanses us for all unrighteousness.*” That statement goes back to **v. 7** (“*the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin*”). It goes beyond our forgiveness and points to our sanctification. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us (see **Heb 9:14, 22**). **Eph 5:25-26** speaks of how Christ “*loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her*

by the washing of water with the word.” Sacrifice is intimately tied to love, because you cannot have selfishness and at the same time exhibit love. Consider the different ways in which Christ loved us, his bride, sacrificially: (A) He humbled himself and set aside his own glory in heaven and equality with the Father in order to take the form of a bond-servant, all for the sake of his bride (see **Phil 2:5-7**); (B) He resisted temptation for the sake of his bride (**Luke 4:1-13**); (C) He suffered physically, emotionally, and spiritually for the sake of his bride; (D) He bore his bride’s grief, pain, and, ultimately, her sin; (E) He gave his time, possessions, thoughts, emotions, and ultimately his very life—all that he had—for his bride.

The statement in **v. 10** that “*we have not sinned*” is the most blatant and serious denial of the gospel. In **v. 6**, if a person says he or she is a believer, but his or her life is inconsistent with the claim of faith, then “*we lie*.” In **v. 8**, the person says that “*we have no sin*,” which means that “*we are deceiving ourselves*.” But in **v. 10**, the claim is that the person has never sinned. That is not simply a matter of being deceived or lying to oneself, but in saying or believing that we have not sinned “*we make Him a liar*.” This verse that takes us back to the beginning. By making God a liar means that he is no longer “light” (**v. 5**). Further, when the verse ends by saying that “*His word is not in us*,” it means that the person does not have the “*Word of Life*” (**v. 1**) in his or her life. The claim that one has not sinned “attacks God’s nature and revelation, because his word declares sin to be universal and present (Ps. 14:3; Isa. 53:6; 64:6)” (DeYoung 1989: 1180). As a result, “The most elemental presence of the Word of God in the heart and conscience has been denied. Consequently the possibility of hearing a redemptive Word is denied. The ability to live by the Word is removed. . . . The possibility of receiving the forgiveness offered by God is lost.” (Barker 1981: 313)

- **2:1-2—Jesus is our advocate and the propitiation of our sins**

*<sup>1</sup> My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; <sup>2</sup> and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.*

In these two verses, John advances the argument he has been making in **1:5-10**. Those verses were describing the significance of God as the Light and our response to that, namely, our walking in the Light versus walking in darkness. He pointed out the significant consequences of our denying our sinfulness and the fact that we have sinned but also pointed out Christ’s faithfulness to forgive us if we confess our sins. His discussion there was all in the indicative, i.e., he was describing the facts, so that we would draw the proper conclusions for our lives. Now, John is plainly urging us not to sin and pointing us to Jesus, who is both our Advocate with the Father and the propitiation of our sins.

The Greek word translated “Advocate” is *Paraklētōs* which means “one called alongside to help; or Comforter, Advocate, Intercessor” (NASB 1995: John 14:16n.1; see Danker 2000: *paraklētōs*, 766; Zodhiates 1993: *paraklētōs*, 1107). Jesus called the Holy Spirit the *paraklētōs* in **John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7**. Significantly, in **John 14:16** he said, “*I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever*.” Jesus obviously was not claiming that he was the Holy Spirit; he is the Son. But just as Jesus is divine, so is the Spirit. All members of the Trinity have the same nature or essence; as Feinberg put it, “since there is only one divine essence shared equally by all three persons, there is a sense in which all three persons ‘do’ whatever any of them does” (Feinberg 2001: 495). Thus, in the very passage where Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit (**John 14:17**), he also says, “*I will come to you*” (**John 14:18**). In that sense, the presence of Christ is the presence of the Spirit and *vice versa*. Additionally, Carson explains, “‘Another paraclete’ in the context of Jesus’ departure implies that the disciples already have one, the one who is departing. Although Jesus is never in the Fourth Gospel explicitly referred to as a *paraklētōs*, the title is applied to him in 1 John 2:1.” (Carson 1991: 500)<sup>2</sup> Zodhiates adds, “Christ designates the Holy Spirit as Paraclete (John 14:16), and calls him *allos*, another, which means another of equal quality and not *heteros*, another of a different quality. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is designated by Jesus Christ as equal with Himself, i.e., God (1 John 2:1). . . . The Holy Spirit is called a Paraclete because He undertakes Christ’s office in the world while Christ is not in the world as the God-Man in bodily form. In addition, the Holy Spirit is also called the Paraclete because He acts as Christ’s substitute on earth. When Christ in John 14:16 designates Himself as a paraclete, the same as the Holy Spirit, the word must not be understood as applying to Christ in the same sense as in 1 John 2:1 where it refers to our substitutionary Advocate who pleads our cause with the Father. It should rather be taken as He who

<sup>2</sup> “Inasmuch as the Paraclete is given as, in certain respects, a personal replacement for Jesus . . . John does not hesitate to use the personal masculine pronoun of him even though the word ‘Spirit’ in Greek is formally neuter” (Carson 1991: 510).

pleads God's cause with us (see John 14:7-9)." (Zodhiates 1993: *paraklētos*, 1107)

In addition to being our Advocate, John adds that our Advocate is "*Jesus Christ the righteous.*" This is actually a three-fold description of Jesus: "Jesus" indicates his human nature, "Christ" indicates his messianic office, and "righteous" indicates his divine character. It is tied by to **1:9**, where God is called "righteous" (the same word, *dikaios*, is used in both cases).

In **v. 2**, Jesus is also called the "propitiation" for our sins. "Propitiation" is the language of the temple and indicates that we were under God's wrath but now that wrath has been satisfied and quenched. Because God himself is morally holy and perfect, that is the standard to which he holds us (**Matt 5:48**). However, "once a person sins, it is impossible to ever be perfect" (Sproul 2002: 94; see also at 53). God's wrath "is in fact his holy reaction to evil. . . . What is common to the biblical concepts of the holiness and the wrath of God is the truth that they cannot coexist with sin. God's holiness exposes sin; his wrath opposes it. So sin cannot approach God, and God cannot tolerate sin." (Stott 1986: 102, 103, 106; see **Hab 1:13; Rom 1:18**) Christianity alone recognizes and takes seriously the "fallenness" of human beings, the gravity of sin, the holiness and perfection of God, the incompatibility of God and sin coexisting together, the fact that all humans have earned and deserve judgment for their sins, and the inability of people by their own efforts to save themselves. The difference of Christianity is Jesus; the difference of Christianity is the cross. Timothy Keller points out, "All other major faiths have founders who are teachers that show the way to salvation. Only Jesus claimed to actually *be* the way of salvation himself." (Keller 2008: 174) That is why the fact that Jesus was fully man but also was fully God not only is important but is absolutely necessary to salvation. Gleason Archer states, "God as God could not forgive us for our sins unless our sins were fully paid for; otherwise He could have been a condoner and protector of the violation of His own holy law. It was only as a man that God in Christ could furnish a satisfaction sufficient to atone for the sins of mankind; for only a man, a true human being, could properly represent the human race. But our Redeemer also had to be God, for only God could furnish a sacrifice of infinite value, to compensate for the penalty of eternal hell that our sin demands, according to the righteous claims of divine justice." (Archer 1982: 323) Christ bore our punishment on the cross so that we do not have to face God's punishment for our sin; he was forsaken on the cross so that we can be accepted. In Christ, we are as free from the guilt and penalty of sin as if we had paid the full price for our sin ourselves (**Rom 6:3-7; Gal 2:20**).

The Greek noun for "propitiation" is *hilasmos*, from the verb which means to propitiate or expiate (Zodhiates 1992: *hilasmos*, 769). It is equivalent to the adjective *hilastērion*, which Paul uses in **Rom 3:25** when he calls Jesus' sacrifice on the cross a "propitiation" (or "sacrifice of atonement"—NIV). The LXX (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Septuagint, which was used during Jesus' time on earth and often is quoted in the NT) translates the word for "mercy seat" (the lid of the ark of the covenant in the Tabernacle and Temple, which was sprinkled with the blood of the sin offering on the Day of Atonement), as "*hilastērion*" (**Exod 25:17**, LXX; see also **Heb 9:5** which refers to the mercy seat as the *hilastērion*). The use of these terms go back to the Day of Atonement and the rituals performed by the High Priest in connection with day of Atonement; likewise, these terms all are connected with Christ's shedding his blood on the cross. In fact, the Day of Atonement was a "type" that pointed to Christ's death on the cross. All of the major elements of the ritual performed on the Day of Atonement were "types" that pointed to Christ: the rites were performed at the temple (**Lev 16:23, 20, 33**)—Christ is the true temple (**John 1:14; 2:18-22**); the high priest performed the rites (**Lev 16:2-3, 32-33**)—Christ is our high priest (**Heb 4:14-15; 5:5-10; 8:1-6; 9:11; 10:21**); a bull and a goat were sacrificed as sin offerings and their blood was shed (**Lev 16:8-9, 15**)—Christ was sacrificed for our sins and his blood was shed (**Heb 7:27; 9:12, 14, 26, 28**); the high priest entered the holy of holies behind the veil (**Lev 16:12-15**)—Christ's body is the true veil (**Heb 10:19-20**) and he entered the true holy of holies (**Heb 8:1-2; 9:11-12, 24**); the blood of the goat was sprinkled on the mercy seat (**Lev 16:14-15**)—Christ is the mercy seat (**Rom 3:25**, cp. **Exod 25:17** LXX); the sins of the nation were imputed to the scapegoat (**Lev 16:20-21**)—Christ bore our sins (**Isa 53:4-5; Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 2:24**) and became sin for us (**2 Cor 5:21**); the scapegoat was led into the wilderness (**Lev 16:21-22**)—Christ was led into the ultimate wilderness of separation from God (**Isa 53:8; Matt 27:46**); the bodies of the slain animals were burned outside the camp (**Heb 13:11**; see Edersheim 1988: 324)—"Therefore, Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate" (**Heb 13:12**).

What Christ accomplished on the cross was of infinitely greater value than the rites performed by the high priest on the Day of Atonement, for at least four reasons. First, the difference between the blood of animals and the blood of Christ: **Leviticus 16-17** stresses the importance of sacrificial blood in order to make atonement for sin. The shedding of the sacrificial animal's blood was necessary for the high priest to have the blood he needed to bring into the holy of holies and sprinkle on the mercy seat. **Hebrews 7-10** demonstrates that Christ's



sacrifice on the cross was what the Day of Atonement had always pointed to. “The cross meant there could be ‘something to offer’ so that Christ could function as priest (8:3)” (Nelson 2003: 254). Christ’s own blood infinitely exceeded in value the blood of animals: “The old rite was ineffective because it used animal blood and was repeated (10:1-4); Christ’s priestly act took place but only once and involved his own blood as an offering of himself (7:27; 9:25-26). Moreover, it took place in the heavenly realm of true reality (9:24 in contrast to 10:1). Christ’s accomplishment is the ultimate example of the scriptural axiom that purification must be effected by the ritual utilization of blood (9:13-14, 21-23). But his blood is more effective because it was literally his own, the result of an obedient self-offering performed through ‘eternal spirit’ and thus the polar opposite of anything physical or temporary (9:12). The redeeming and purifying effect of his blood is interior and eternal rather than external and impermanent (9:12-14; cf. 10:1-4).” (Nelson 2003: 256)

Second, the difference between the holy place the high priest entered and the holy place Christ entered: The essential element on the Day of Atonement was the high priest’s entering God’s presence in the holy of holies, behind the curtain, and applying the sacrificial blood to the mercy seat to purify the holy things and the nation from pollution and sin (**Lev 16:2-19**). By contrast, through his resurrection and ascension Christ entered “*heaven itself*” (**Heb 9:24**; see also **Heb 4:14; 8:1-2**), into “*the inner shrine behind the curtain*” (**Heb 6:19-20**, RSV). Thus, Christ acts both as victim and as high priest: as victim his blood was perfect because he led a perfect life and was without sin (**Heb 9:12-14; 10:4-10**); as high priest He was also perfect because he did not have to atone for himself (**Heb 7:26-27; 9:7**). Further, the high priest sprinkled the blood in the holy of holies behind the veil. Jesus died in full public view, and at his death “*the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom*” (**Matt 27:51**). These two facts signify that Jesus achieved atonement for sins for everyone who has faith in him, instead of just covering the sins of the nation for a year.

Third, the difference between the wilderness where the scapegoat was sent and Christ’s separation from the Father: “The role of the scapegoat is unique to the Day of Atonement, symbolizing the removal (into the most non-sacred space) of Israel’s sin. Thus the blood of one goat is brought into the Most Holy Place, while the scapegoat is driven to the furthest point from God (the wilderness).” (Williamson 2007: 110) For all of eternity Jesus had experienced a perfect, loving relationship with the Father. However, on the cross, Jesus bore our sins (**Isa 53:4-5**), and “*By oppression and judgment He was taken away [and] was cut off out of the land of the living*” (**Isa 53:8**). “In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says that no physical destruction can compare with the spiritual destruction of hell, of losing the presence of God. But this is exactly what happened to Jesus on the cross—he was forsaken by the Father (Matthew 27:46). . . . When he cried out that his God had forsaken him he was experiencing hell itself. But consider—if our debt for sin is so great that it is never paid off there, but our hell stretches on for eternity, then what are we to conclude from the fact that Jesus said the payment was ‘finished’ (John 19:30) after only three hours? We learn that what he felt on the cross was far worse and deeper than all of our deserved hells put together.” (Keller n.d.: n.p.) The scapegoat’s being driven into the wilderness pales in comparison to Jesus’ being driven from the presence of the Father.

Fourth, the difference between the effects of the sacrifices on people: **Heb 9:9** says that the gifts and sacrifices offered at the temple—including the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement—“*cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience.*” On the other hand, **Heb 9:14** says, “*How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*” In other words, the sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement could not make a person clean *on the inside*. Only Christ can bring about true inner change. All of this highlights the utter inability of anyone or anything other than Christ to propitiate and atone for our sins. Such a monumental act could only be accomplished by “*Jesus Christ the righteous.*”

When **v. 2** says that Jesus is the propitiation of sins “*not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world,*” that is consistent with what Jesus said in **John 14:6**, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.*” In other words, if anyone in the entire world can be saved and come to the Father, it can only be through Jesus Christ. It cannot possibly mean that all people without limitation in fact have their sins propitiated and have eternal life. The Bible is clear that not everyone will be saved (see, e.g., **Matt 7:13-14, 21-23; 10:28; 13:40-43; 22:14; 25:31-46; John 5:28-29; 2 Thess 1:6-10**). Consequently, his propitiation cannot be for all people *without limitation*. Christ’s propitiation is, however, for all people *without distinction*. In other words, his propitiation is for all people regardless of race, tribe, nationality, class, age, sex, wealth, education, occupation, health, or any other such distinctions. Thus, “*You [Christ] were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation*” (**Rev 5:9**; see also **Gal 3:28; Col 3:11**). **John 11:51-52** is to the same effect; it is in the same order as **1 John 2:2** and shows its

meaning.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, we see Christ's propitiation in **v. 2** is linked with his advocacy in **v. 1**. Christ's intercession and advocacy is always on behalf of those whose sins he has propitiated. Thus, in **John 17:9** Jesus said, "I ask on their [his disciples and those who subsequently would come to faith] behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours." To this same effect is **Rom 8:33-34** ("Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us."); and **Heb 7:25** ("He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them"). The Father always hears Christ when he advocates and intercedes (**John 11:41-42**); Christ's advocacy and intercession is therefore 100% effective. This is consistent with the fact that "all that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. . . . This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day." (**John 6:37-39**) He could not be advocating on behalf of all people without limitation, i.e., on behalf of those whose names have not been written in the book of life, because that would mean that no one would be judged and condemned; or, to put it another way, that would mean that his advocacy would not be 100% effective, because many people will not be saved, but will be judged and condemned. In short, propitiation is the removal and satisfaction of God's wrath against sin; Jesus has satisfied God's wrath for those who, as a result of being regenerated (born again) through the work of the Holy Spirit, come to him in repentance and faith, people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, without distinction, but not for those who do not come to him in repentance and faith. **John 3:36** makes this clear: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

- **2:3-6—Keeping God's word and commandments shows that we know him**

<sup>3</sup> *By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.* <sup>4</sup> *The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him;* <sup>5</sup> *but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him:* <sup>6</sup> *the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.*

In chapter 1, following the prologue, John began by talking about having "fellowship" with God (**1:6**). To have fellowship with God requires that we "walk in the Light" (**1:7**), which results in our having fellowship with one another as well as with God. Having fellowship with God also requires that we acknowledge our sinfulness and confess our sins, which results in our being forgiven and cleansed of our unrighteousness (**1:9**). Now, John moves to the related subject of "knowing" God. This is of the highest importance, since Jesus said, "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (**John 17:3**). To "know" the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent is not merely "head knowledge" or knowing "about" him, but is intimately related to being in fellowship with him.

The word "know," both here in **vv. 3-5** and in **John 17:3**, is *ginōskō*, which, in its context, "means an experiential knowing, not simply an intellectual understanding of facts about God or Jesus or the Bible" (Tarrants 2016: The Call to Know). In short, it means having a personal, intimate, loving relationship with God through Christ. This relationship begins when we are "born again" (**John 3:3-8; 1 Pet 1:3, 23**). Then, "Just as a human being is physically born into the world and moves through a developmental cycle from infant to child to adolescent to adult, so a child of God is born spiritually and is called to move through a similar developmental cycle" (Tarrants 2016: The Call to Go).

John immediately says that the key test to "knowing" God in Christ is to "keep His commandments," to "keep his word," and "to walk in the same manner as He walked" (**vv. 4, 5, 6**). This is akin to "walking in the light" (**1:7**). Jesus said the same thing (**John 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:10**). It needs to be understood that we cannot

3

<b>1 John 2:2</b>	<b>John 11:51-52</b>
He is the propitiation for our sins,	he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation,
and not for ours only	and not for the nation only,
but also for the sins of the whole world.	but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

work our way to heaven but are saved only by God’s grace through faith in Christ (**John 3:16-18; 6:28-29; Rom 2:16-17; 10:8-13; Eph 2:8-9; Gal 3:1-14**); nevertheless, we are saved for a *purpose*: “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*” (**Eph 2:10**) The works we do after we receive Christ by faith, i.e., our obedience to him—keeping his commandments, keeping his word, walking in the same manner as he walked—“are an index of the spiritual condition of a person’s heart. . . . Works are seen as unmistakable evidence of the loyalty of the heart; they express belief or unbelief, faithfulness or unfaithfulness. The judgment will reveal whether or not people’s loyalties have been with God and the Lamb or with God’s enemies.” (Ngundu 2006: 1576; see **Matt 6:19-21; 24:45-51; 25:31-46; Luke 42-48; Phil 2:12-13; 1 Tim 6:18-19; Heb 6:10-12; 1 John 4:7-21**) In short, no “religious experience” is valid if it does not have moral and behavioral consequences.

Obedying God’s commandments, keeping his word, and walking as Christ walked are not matters of “legalism.” They are matters of the heart and of profound devotion. We see this in the wording of **vv. 4-5**. In **v. 4**, John says that to not keep Christ’s commandments makes a person a liar, “*and the truth is not in him.*” In **v. 5**, John then speaks of the converse of that situation, i.e., the person “*who keeps His word.*” Since this is the converse of the situation in **v. 4**, one would expect John to have said that, to keep Christ’s word results in the truth being in him. However, he does not say that. Instead, the result of keeping Christ’s word is that “*in him the love of God has truly been perfected.*” Love (*agapē*, from the verb *agapaō*) is an important concept in 1 John: it is used more times in this book (18) than in any other book in the NT. It means “to have a warm regard for and interest in another; to have high esteem for or satisfaction with something, *cherish, have affection for, love, take pleasure in*” (Danker 2000: *agapaō*, 5). It highlights the closeness of the relational nature of “knowing” God. Obedience, therefore, is and cannot be “forced” or done with gritted teeth. It is a response of love to what God in Christ has done for us and in us. As Leon Morris says, “Love delights to do God’s will” (Morris 1970: 1263). John’s reference in **v. 6** to “abiding in him” also highlights the closeness of the relational nature of “knowing” God.

- **2:7-8—The commandment is both old and new**

<sup>7</sup> *Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard.* <sup>8</sup> *On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining.*

The “commandment” John is talking about is said several times in different ways: “*walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light*”; “*keep his commandments*”; “*keep His word*”; “*walk in the same manner as He walked.*” Those commands may be phrased differently, but the substance is the same. This command was old in that Jesus had given it to his disciples himself: “*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments*” (**John 14:15**; see also **John 14:21**); “*If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word*” (**John 14:23**).

The *substance* of keeping Jesus’ commandments, his word, walking in the Light, and walking in the same manner as he walked is *love*. Jesus had summarized the entire Bible by saying, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*’ *This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.*” (**Matt 22:37-40**) That command had gone back to the OT, since Jesus had simply quoted **Deut 6:5** and **Lev 19:18**. Then, on the night before he died, he told his disciples, “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (**John 13:34-35**; see also **John 15:12, 17**) Love clearly is the substance of the command to walk in the Light, walk as Jesus walked, keep his commandments, and keep his word. We know that because in **vv. 9-11** John moves explicitly to talk of love: he compares it to “the Light” and failure to love with “darkness.” Thus, the command to love is “old” and has been present “*from the beginning.*”

Yet, John also says that the command is “new.” It is new in that Jesus had invested the command to love with new depth and meaning. That is why in **v. 8** John says it “*is true in Him.*” But then he then said that the command to love is now “*in you.*” By saying that, John is telling us that, as Christians, what was true of Jesus and how he loved is now to be true of us. That is true because we have the same Holy Spirit in us that Jesus had (**Rom 8:12-17**). Jesus made the command to love new in several ways. First, Jesus made love the central test of our life and faithfulness. He did that by bringing **Deut 6:5** and **Lev 19:18** together in a way no one had ever done before and saying that the whole teaching of the OT (“*the Law and the Prophets*”) hangs on that.

Consequently, love is the central sign that we are his disciples: “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (**John 13:35**). Second, he embodied love as no one ever had done before. He said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (**John 15:13**). He himself did that supremely on the cross. On the cross he not only laid down his physical life but took our sins and the punishment due for those sins upon himself. He thus bore the wrath of God’s judgment, including being forsaken by the Father, with whom he had had an everlasting closeness and loving relationship greater than any such relationship on earth. Third, he vastly expanded the extent of our obligation to love our neighbor. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made clear that our obligation to love others includes the obligation to “love your enemies” (**Matt 5:44**). In the parable of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25-37**) Jesus expanded on that. The parable makes clear that the obligation to love applies to anyone in need, regardless of race, tribe, sex, poverty, or any other condition. The parable also makes clear that to “love your neighbor” is costly, and will involve our time, effort, and money. In fact, if we take “love your neighbor as yourself” literally, it would mean that we should expend the same amount of time, effort, and money seeking the welfare of others as we do for ourselves. It is a radical command. But Jesus did it. Fourth, the command to love is “new” in that love is now to be focus and motivator of our lives. Christians are “new creatures” in Christ (**2 Cor 5:17**). We are no longer to be “conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (**Rom 12:2**). We are now being led by the Spirit, not by the flesh, and therefore are no longer to live according to the flesh (**Rom 8:12-14**). As a result, we are to put off the old life and put on the new (**Eph 4:17-24; Col 3:10**). And love is the central aspect of the new life in Christ.

God is not fooled by our words. Therefore, He has given us a test by which we, everyone else, and God Himself can clearly see whether we do, in fact, love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. The test is this: how we do the “second commandment” (i.e., how we love people) is the proof of whether we are really doing the “first commandment” (i.e., loving God). Thus, when Jesus confronted Peter and asked him three times, “Do you love Me?” Jesus did not simply accept Peter’s answer, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” Instead, Jesus then told Peter, “Tend My sheep” (**John 21:15-17**). What Jesus was saying to Peter was this: “If you truly love Me, then you will prove your love by taking care of My sheep.” The reason why this test is true—and why it applies to people of every race, tribe, sex, or any other condition—is because every human being has been made in the “image of God” (**Gen 1:26-27; 5:1-3; 9:6; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10; Jas 3:9**); how we treat God’s image shows what we really think of Him. John makes that very point clear later in this epistle. In **1 John 4:20** he says, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” So, again, he is saying, how we do the “second commandment” (i.e., how we love people) is the proof of whether we are really doing the “first commandment” (i.e., loving God). This is the very heart of the gospel and our faith.

Living this kind of life of love is the difference between light and darkness. In Christ, “the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” (**John 3:19-21**) John builds on that in v. 8 by saying “the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining.” In other words, Jesus is the truth, “the true Light.” He has told us, shown us, and empowered us to “walk in the Light” and “practice the truth.” When we take what Christ has given us deeply into us and let him, by the Spirit, change and transform us, we will become “conformed to the image” of Christ himself (**Rom 8:29**), we will attain to “the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (**Eph 4:13**), and “the gates of Hades will not overpower” the church (**Matt 16:18**). Those are the stakes. It is that important.

- **2:9-11—Loving our brother shows that we are in the light**

<sup>9</sup> The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. <sup>10</sup> The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. <sup>11</sup> But the one who 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.

In this section, John is pointing out that light and love are connected, just as darkness and hatred are connected. There is no middle ground. Our love or hatred toward others not only reveals whether we are in the light or darkness, but actually contributes to the light or darkness that we already are in. Thus, the one who loves has “no cause for stumbling in him” because the light shines on his path, enabling him to see properly; on the other hand, the one who hates “does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.” As

John Stott summarizes, “Hatred distorts our perspective. We do not first misjudge people and then hate them as a result; our view of them is already jaundiced by our hatred. It is love which sees straight, thinks clearly and makes us balanced in our outlook, judgments and conduct.” (Stott 1988: 100)

John’s use of the metaphor “walking” (“*no cause for stumbling*”; “*walks in darkness*”) means that both love and hatred, light and darkness, are manifested primarily by what a person does. Glenn Barker states, “To walk in the light is to love one’s brother, and God’s love will express itself in concrete actions. If these are missing, it is not because love can be neutral or can exist unexpressed. Love unexpressed is not love at all. Love has no neutral capabilities. When it is absent, hate is present.” (Barker 1981: 317)

- **2:12-14—John’s reason for writing to us**

*<sup>12</sup>I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake.*

*<sup>13</sup>I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. <sup>14</sup>I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*

In this section, John addresses three groups of people: children; young men; and fathers. He addresses each group twice. Each group probably stands for stages of spiritual development: children = newborn Christians; young men = more developed believers; fathers = mature and experienced believers. The two messages to each group are similar, and the repetition is probably done for emphasis. To the children, John notes that their sins have been forgiven and they have come to know the Father. These are the earliest experiences of becoming a Christian. John is here consistent with what is said in **Rom 8:15-16** and **Gal 4:6**, both of which speak of our being adopted as sons of children of God and crying out to him, “*Abba! Father!*” John observes that the young men “*have overcome the evil one,*” are strong, and that “*the word of God abides in you.*” By saying this, he is emphasizing that our faith is not simply enjoying and resting in our forgiveness and relationship with God but is an active faith. Active faith is a growing faith that involves not yielding to the temptations of sin and the evil one but, instead, being led by the Spirit so that we progressively become more and more like Jesus Christ. Fathers “*know Him who has been from the beginning.*” This emphasizes the unchangeableness of God (see **Heb 13:8**). It is indicating that, because of their spiritual maturity, the fathers are characterized by a similar unchangeableness; their faith is as solid as the Rock on which it is based.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What are the properties of light, and how should our “walking in the light” manifest those properties?
2. Discuss the relationship of the power of indwelling sin in our lives as well as the fact that we have been born again, and have received a new heart, the mind of Christ, and the Holy Spirit.
  - How does sin arise, and why do we sin?
  - Why can we have assurance that we are forgiven when we confess our sins?
3. What are the different ways in which Christ has demonstrated his love for us?
4. In **2:1**, Jesus is called our “Advocate” (*Paraklētos*), the same term used to describe the Holy Spirit. Discuss the relationship and roles of Jesus and the Holy Spirit as our Advocate.
5. What is propitiation, and how was it accomplished?
  - How did the rituals performed on the day of Atonement point forward to Christ?
6. What does it mean to “know” God?
  - How do we know that we know God?

- What best reveals the spiritual condition of our heart?

7. What is the substance or essence of?

8. How can the command to love be both old and new?

9. What is the test for knowing whether we love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and why is that the test?

10. How can we move from being “children,” to “young men,” to “fathers” in the faith?

### C. *Abiding in Truth* (2:15–4:6)

- **2:15-17—Our relationship with the world**

<sup>15</sup> *Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.* <sup>16</sup> *For, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.* <sup>17</sup> *The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.*

Up until this point, John has been describing important aspects of the Christian life. We have seen important things we should be doing and things we should not be doing. However, all of the verbs he has used, grammatically have been in the indicative mood (i.e., verbs used for ordinary objective statements, questions, etc.). Now in v. 15 he uses his first imperative verb (i.e., a verb of command): “*Do not love the world nor the things in the world.*” Since this is his first command, it is important, and is important to understand why it is so important.

The first question to consider is how John’s command to not love the world relates to what Jesus said in **John 3:16**, “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*” There are basically two differences between what Jesus said about God’s great love for the world and John’s command for us not to love the world or the things of the world. First, “the world” has different connotations in Jesus’ and John’s statements. When the world is viewed as people, especially lost people, as Jesus was saying, it is to be loved; however, when the world is viewed as an evil system under the control of Satan, as John is saying, it is not to be loved (see **2 Cor 4:4**). Second, the verb “love” has different connotations in Jesus’ and John’s statements. The Greek word for “love” in both cases is *agapaō*, which indicates great esteem, deep feelings, and a direction of the will for someone or something (see Danker 2000: *agapaō*, 5; Zodhiates 1993: *agapaō*, 24-25). The love of which Jesus spoke is the holy love of redemption, of putting the great need of the lost world first, even at the expense of Christ’s own life (see **John 15:13**). On the other hand, to love the world and the things of the world is the selfish love of sharing in the sin of the godless world; that is the very love Jesus referred to in **John 3:19**: “*This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved [the verb *agapaō*] the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.*”

Just as John had earlier contrasted light and darkness, love and hatred, and indicated that there is no neutral or third alternative, so he now pointing out that the love of the world and the things of the world and the love of the Father are mutually exclusive. Again, there is no neutral or third alternative. In this, he echoes **Jas 4:4**, which says, “*Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*” In v. 16 John points out that “*all that is in the world*”—which he then defines as “*the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life*”—“*is not from the Father, but is from the world.*” Again, he is making clear that everything is either from the world or from the Father, it is one or the other; there is no neutral or third alternative.

The word “lust” in v. 16 is *epithumia*, which, again, means to “desire greatly, strong desire, longing”; particularly when used in a bad sense, it means “irregular and inordinate desire, appetite, lust” (Zodhiates 1993: *epithumia*, 627). **Verse 16** is essentially telling us that our temptation to sin—i.e., loving the world, the things of the world, and following the ways of the world—is not primarily an external matter, but is internal. In this, John is echoing **Jas 1:13-15**, which says, “<sup>13</sup> *Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.* <sup>14</sup> *But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.* <sup>15</sup> *Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.*” “Lust” in **Jas 1:14** also is *epithumia*.

Our external circumstances, other people, and Satan himself continually are giving us opportunities either to demonstrate faithfulness to God or to sin. But even powerful circumstances combined with persuasive people working in concert with Satan himself cannot spiritually endanger us *unless and until we make Satan's suggestions our own*. Two people may be confronted with the same external circumstances, but one sins and the other does not. For example, a poor person in great need sees an unguarded wallet; whether he steals it or not is based entirely on whether or not he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. A lonely, married, businessman far from home meets an attractive woman who wants to go to bed with him; whether he sleeps with her or remains faithful to his wife depends entirely on whether or not he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. John is telling us that the popular phrase, “the devil made me do it,” is not true. The devil cannot make us do anything that we choose not to do. We ourselves are responsible for everything we do, and God legitimately can hold us accountable for our actions. As Jesus said in **Matt 15:19**, that “*out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.*” In short, we always and only do *what we most desire*.

This pattern has been the case since the very first human beings (Adam and Eve) committed the very first sin (eating the forbidden fruit): they lusted in their heart for what they saw with their eyes. In other words, they desired to eat the fruit for the benefits they thought they would get more than they desired to trust and obey God. That always is the way. We sin because we want to. The “*boastful pride of life*” also goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. By listening to Satan and eating the fruit, they were asserting their own autonomy. They believed that they could determine what was “good and evil” on their own and in contradiction to what God had said. That is “*the boastful pride of life.*” Only by “*taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*” (**2 Cor 10:5**) can we avoid succumbing to our lusts and our pride and remain faithful to God.

In **v. 17**, John contrasts the transient nature of the world and its lusts with the everlasting nature of “*the one who does the will of God.*” Once again, there are only two ways: the way of the world and its lusts versus doing the will of God; there is no neutral or third alternative. The centrality of doing the will of God was highlighted by Jesus, who said that “*whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother*” (**Mark 3:35**). We need to recognize that, in Christ, our lives have been fundamentally changed. We are “*new creatures*” (**2 Cor 5:17**). Although we are still in the world, we are “*not of the world,*” even as Jesus is “*not of the world*” (**John 17:14, 16**). Now “*our citizenship is in heaven*” (**Phil 3:20**). God has “*rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son*” (**Col 1:13**). Only in Christ do we have eternal life, whereas “*he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him*” (**John 3:36**). Consequently, we are not to be “*conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (**Rom 12:2**). In short, our lives should reflect the eternal nature of Christ, his kingdom, and our new nature in Christ, not the transient nature of this world and our former lives as slaves of sin (**John 8:34**).

- **2:18-23—The nature of antichrist**

*<sup>18</sup> Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour. <sup>19</sup> They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. <sup>20</sup> But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know. <sup>21</sup> I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth. <sup>22</sup> Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. <sup>23</sup> Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.*

The NT makes clear that Christ's first coming (or, more specifically, the complex of His death, resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost) is of great eschatological significance. Some people think that the “last days” is a period of time in the future which will occur just before Jesus comes again. That is not true. Christ's first coming marked the beginning of the “last days” which will continue until His return. We know that from Peter's speech on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2**. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the believers, they began speaking in languages they had not previously learned. The people in Jerusalem thought they were drunk. But Peter got up and told them, “*This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘that I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind’*” (**Acts 2:16-17**). When Peter quotes the words of the prophet Joel and applies them to the event which has just occurred, “he is saying in effect: ‘We are in the last days now’” (Hoekema 1979: 16). In **v. 18**, John is emphasizing the “lateness of the day” by twice saying that “*it is the last hour.*” One of the things this is doing is pointing out the

seriousness of coming to Christ in faith since, as he has stated on more than one occasion, the only alternative is the darkness of the world which will soon pass away and result in death.

The contrast between Christ and the world is further highlighted by John's mention of antichrist. Contrary to much popular opinion, the term "antichrist" (Greek = *antichristos*) is not found in the book of Revelation but appears only in **1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3**; and **2 John 7**. Nevertheless, "when the title does occur for the first time, the matter is not discussed as a novelty. Evidently the concept was old, even if the term were new." (Ford 1979: 162) Thus, John says, "*you have heard that antichrist is coming*" (**1 John 2:18**). Hoekema relates that "anti" has different, though related, meanings: "The original meaning of the Greek prefix *anti* is 'instead of' or 'in place of.' On this basis *antichristos* means a substitute Christ or a rival Christ. Since, however, the antichrist as depicted in the New Testament is also the sworn adversary of Christ, we may combine both ideas: the antichrist is both a *rival* Christ and an *opponent* of Christ." (Hoekema 1979: 157) This dual nature of Antichrist is expressed as early as the *Didache* (c. 70–110), which talks about "the deceiver of the world" who will "commit abominations the likes of which have never happened before," and humanity's passing through a "fiery test" in which many will fall away but others will endure in their faith and be saved (*Didache* 1989: 16.4-5).

"A survey of the historic teachings about the antichrist brings two main lines of thought to the fore: (1) that the antichrist is a power or movement; and (2) that the antichrist is a human person at the end of history." (Berkouwer 1972: 261) Both views arose early in church history (Johnson 1981: 521-22, 529). The issue of person versus personification is reflected in John's ambiguous use of the term "antichrist." In **1 John 2:18** ("*you heard that antichrist is coming*") *antichristos* appears to be a person who will come in the future, although that is not entirely clear since no definite article ("the") is used before the word "antichrist."<sup>4</sup> However, "antichrist" is not limited to one person. **2:18** adds, "*even now many antichrists have appeared.*" John then says, "*They went out from us, but they were not really of us*" (**2:19**).<sup>5</sup> Thus, "antichrist" is equated with all false teachers. "In the false teacher 'the antichrist' was actually present" (Johnson 1981: 527).

**1 John 2:22** says, "*Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.*" In that verse "the antichrist is thought of as a person, since the definite article is used with the word. But he is thought of as a person who is already present in John's day—in fact, as one who stands for a group of persons" (Hoekema 1979: 157). Hence, John's use of the term "antichrist" appears to be a personification to describe anyone who denies the truth of Christ. **1 John 4:3** adds to the description: "*Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.*" Even though the definite article is used with "antichrist," and both the future coming and current presence are referred to, "John speaks of antichrist only in impersonal terms" (Hoekema 1979: 157). **2 John 7** states, "*Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist.*" In all of these passages the emphasis is not on the person, but on the heretical *beliefs* and *teaching* concerning Jesus Christ. "The central meaning of the antichrist, according to John, is the great lie, the denial that Jesus is the Christ" (Berkouwer 1972: 265).

Riddlebarger summarizes John's treatment of Antichrist: (1) "John argues that Antichrist is not some mysterious individual who is only and finally revealed in the last days. In fact, John says just the opposite. Whatever (or whoever) the Antichrist is, it (or he or she as the case may be) was already present at the time of John's writing. . . . The very presence of Antichrist is clearly an indication that the last hour has indeed already come. And since Antichrist was present in John's own lifetime, we can only conclude that we have been in the last hour since John composed his epistle." (2) "John indicates that there is not merely one Antichrist, but a series of such enemies of Jesus Christ. . . . So it is quite erroneous to contend that Antichrist is limited to a specific individual, totally unknown to Christians until his revelation immediately before Jesus Christ's return. Many Antichrists had already come in John's own lifetime. While it is certainly possible that this multitude of Antichrists will culminate in an Antichrist before Christ comes back, John (who alone among the New Testament writers even uses the term 'Antichrist') does not say this. But he does explicitly state that many Antichrists have already come, and their present opposition to the infant Church is part of the struggle with the

<sup>4</sup> Joel McDurmon also points out that "John does not say that antichrist 'is coming *in the future*,' he simply reminds his listeners that 'antichrist comes.' The verb here is in the present tense, not a participle and not future." (McDurmon 2011: 184-85)

<sup>5</sup> **1 John 2:19** says that the antichrists "*went out from us.*" In his homily on **1 John 2:18-23** Augustine commented, "If before they went out they were not of us, then there are many within, many who haven't gone out but are antichrists even so. . . . I say it so that no one in the Church may be an antichrist. . . . All of us ought to question our own consciences about whether we are antichrists." (Leinenweber 1989: 26)



forces of unbelief about which John is attempting to warn the faithful. In other words, one of John's purposes in writing these epistles is to warn all Christians who worry that Antichrist is still to come in the last hour that, on the contrary, many Antichrists have already come, and so it is indeed *already* the last hour." (3) "John's focus is squarely upon the heretical nature of these individual Antichrists and their false doctrine. . . . Antichrist is any heretic who denies the full humanity or deity of Christ! He was already present when John wrote his first epistle, and John warns us that he will be present throughout the life of the church. John identifies him as an Antichrist solely on the basis of his confession about Jesus Christ! . . . But if anything is clear from John's use of Antichrist terminology, it is that his focus is certainly on the present danger facing the church from heretical false teaching and not on the rise of a nebulous future tyrant. And so while this series of Antichrists that John describes may indeed culminate in an Antichrist, the biblical evidence demonstrates that the primary thrust is doctrinal (the Antichrist is primarily a false teacher) and only incidentally political and economic (i.e., people being prevented from buying and selling)." (Riddlebarger 1994: 5-6)

John is the only biblical writer to actually use the term "antichrist," and his descriptions of Antichrist in **1 and 2 John** are considerably different from most popular contemporary conceptions of Antichrist. John never speaks of "*the* Antichrist" as an evil end-time individual at all. Gary DeMar summarizes, "Antichrist is simply any belief system [or those who espouse it] that disputes the fundamental teachings of Christianity, beginning with the person of Christ. These antichrists are 'religious' figures. The antichrist, contrary to much present-day speculation, is not a political figure, no matter how *anti-* (against) Christ he may be." (DeMar 1999: 269) This should be kept in mind when considering the identity and nature of any purported "Antichrist." Most popular depictions of "Antichrist," however, draw heavily, if not exclusively, from Paul's description of the "*man of lawlessness*" in **2 Thessalonians 2** and the "beasts" of Revelation rather than from John's actual descriptions of "antichrist(s)."

John rounds off his discussion of antichrist in **v. 23**, by again stressing that the essence of antichrist (**1 John 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 7**) is "*whoever denies the Son.*" This has consequences, namely, that whoever denies the Son "*does not have the Father.*" On the other hand, "*the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.*" The issue is a matter of the truth (**v. 21**). This is important, because some people claim to believe in "God" but do not have Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. This would include Jews, Muslims, and others. John's point is that it is impossible to believe in God if you deny that Jesus is the Christ who has come in the flesh from God the Father. Or, to put it another way, if one denies the Son, the "God" such a person claims to believe in is not the true God and, hence, is not God at all.

- **2:24-29—Abide in Christ**

*<sup>24</sup> As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. <sup>25</sup> This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life. <sup>26</sup> These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you. <sup>27</sup> As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him.*

*<sup>28</sup> Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. <sup>29</sup> If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.*

This concluding section of the chapter is an exhortation to abide in the gospel. As such, it is a reminder to remain in the light and love of our savior, and thus takes us back to **vv. 1-14**; it also provides the counterpart to the two great challenges facing believers: the lure of the world and the things of the world (**vv. 15-17**) and the denial of the truth by the antichrists who can arise even within the church (**vv. 18-23**). By abiding in the gospel, we have both the Son and the Father. The result is that we have eternal life.

In this section, John also is reminding us that we have two great safeguards to keep us faithful and secure from the temptations of the world, the flesh, the devil, and the errors of the antichrists. Those two great safeguards are the truth of the gospel, as revealed in God's Word, and the anointing and presence of the Holy Spirit, who is within us. We received both when we believed and became born again. We received the gospel when it was proclaimed and explained by our Christian teachers (**1 John 1:2-3, 5; 2:24, 27**); the anointing of the Spirit was "*received from Him*" (**v. 27**). Jesus had promised to give us the Holy Spirit, who would come into us and be with us forever (**John 14:16-17**). The Spirit and the truth are related. John says "*His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie*" (**v. 27**). Jesus called him "*the Spirit of truth*" (**John 14:17**). He

added, “*the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you*” (**John 14:26**); “*He will testify about Me*” (**John 15:26**); and “*He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you.*” (**John 16:13-14**) The Word is objective truth; the Spirit is our subjective and ongoing experience of the presence of Christ. Both need to be personally grasped and taken into us, so as to transform us into the image of Christ.

Our abiding in the truth of the gospel is not simply a matter of believing and professing correct doctrine. Instead, the truth of the gospel is to be manifested by our “practicing righteousness” (**v. 29**). As we do this, “*we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming*” (**v. 28**). This takes us back to the importance of what John has emphasized throughout this epistle, namely, “practicing the truth” (**1:6**), “walking in the Light” (**1:7**), “keeping his commandments” (**2:3-4**), “keeping his word” (**2:5**), “walking in the same manner as he walked” (**2:6**), “loving his brother” (**2:10**), and “overcoming the evil one” (**2:13-14**). In his Gospel, John had also stressed that how we live now will determine our response to the prospect of the Lord’s return and the judgment that his Second Coming will entail: “*For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.*” (**John 3:20-21**) In short, if our lives demonstrate our faithfulness now, we can look forward to the judgment, because the judgment will reveal that “*it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*” (**Phil 2:13**).

- **3:1-3—We are children of God**

*<sup>1</sup> See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. <sup>2</sup> Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. <sup>3</sup> And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*

The references in **vv. 1-2** to our being the “*children of God*” harks back to our being “*born of Him*” (**2:29**). These verses contrast us, as children of God, and the world, which “*does not know us, because it did not know Him [God and/or Christ].*” That harks back to **2:15-17** and provides another reason to “*not love the world nor the things of the world.*” The reason is that we, as children of God, are so different from the world that the world does not even know us. So why should we love the world and the things of the world, since we are completely unlike the world so as to be completely unknown by it? These verses also continue John’s theme that abiding in the truth of the gospel is not simply a matter of believing and professing correct doctrine but consists living faithful lives. Only the person “*who practices righteousness is born of Him*” (**2:29**) and is therefore qualified to be called a child of God. Consequently, each child of God “*purifies himself, just as He is pure*” (**v. 3**).

These verses also build on the eschatological theme introduced in **2:17** (“*the world is passing away*”), **2:18** (“*it is the last hour*”), and **2:28** (“*when he appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming*”). Now, **v. 2** says that “*it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.*” This is indicating that when Jesus comes again, we will be profoundly changed. Paul spoke at length about this in **1 Corinthians 15**. There he pointed out that Christ’s return will entail resurrection of the dead and transformation of the living. This is necessary because “*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable*” (**1 Cor 15:50**). He discusses the difference between our current, earthly, bodies and our resurrected bodies, as follows: “<sup>42</sup> . . . *It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; <sup>43</sup> it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; <sup>44</sup> it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. . . . <sup>49</sup> Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly. . . . <sup>51</sup> Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup> For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.*” (**1 Cor 15:42-44, 49, 51-53**) Paul also stated that, at his coming, Christ “*will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory*” (**Phil 3:21**). Jesus described our new, transformed selves by saying, “*Those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; for*

they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Luke 20:35-36). Here, John says that we will be like Jesus himself (1 John 3:2).

While we are still in these bodies on this earth, it is impossible to know fully what our new imperishable, immortal, heavenly, and spiritual bodies will be like. The change will be more than simply a physical change. Elsewhere, Paul tells us that now we see dimly, know only in part, and have been blinded (1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 4:4). Then we will see clearly and will know fully (1 Cor 13:12). Thus, John tells us that “we will see Him just as he is” (v. 2). Jesus indicated this in John 17:24 when he said, “Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me.” We will not only see Christ’s glory but will share in it: Paul said, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.” (2 Cor 3:18); and “When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory” (Col 3:4; see also Rom 8:17). In short, our transformation that will occur in connection with the Second Coming of Christ will be an amazing transformation of both the physical and non-physical aspects of our being.

In v. 3, John points out the implication of this for our lives now, namely, that “everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” This hope is fixed and certain, because it is grounded on the promise of Christ himself, and “He who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:23). In saying this, John is echoing James, who said, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (Jas 4:8). Or, as Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8). Our inner purity should reflect Christ’s own purity. Our inner purity is necessary if we expect to “practice the truth” (1:6), “walk in the Light” (1:7), “keep his commandments” (2:3-4), “keep his word” (2:5), “walk in the same manner as he walked” (2:6), “love his brother” (2:10), “overcome the evil one” (2:13-14), “practice righteousness” (2:29), and “have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming” (2:28) This is yet one more reason why we should not “love the world nor the things of the world” or be deceived by antichrists: Christ alone not only gives us eternal life but also is preparing us for an amazing eschatological existence that the world and everyone and everything outside of Christ could never match.

- **3:4-10—We are to be righteous**

*<sup>4</sup> Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup> You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup> No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. <sup>7</sup> Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; <sup>8</sup> the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup> No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. <sup>10</sup> By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.*

This section flows from and builds on v. 3 and continues the theme of righteous living. However, in v. 3 the basis for purifying oneself was the hope of Christ’s second coming; now, in vv. 4-10 the basis for righteous living is Christ’s first coming. In these verses, the practice of righteousness is discussed from two angles: vv. 4-7 tell us that the nature of sin is lawlessness, the purpose of Christ’s coming was to take away sins, and whoever abides in him does not sin; vv. 8-10 tell us that the origin of sin is the devil, the purpose of Christ’s coming was to destroy the works of the devil, and whoever is born of God does not sin. Here, again, we see that there are only two alternatives: righteousness or sin (lawlessness); a person is either a child of God or a child of the devil—and the way we live our life manifests who and what we are. This follows from the fact that Christ is righteous and in him there is no sin; consequently, if we are born of God and abiding in Christ, we will not sin. Although we all do sin (1:8), these verses are a strong call for us to evaluate our lives and bring them into conformity to our new nature in Christ. The reason is that, as John Piper says, John emphatically denies that “spiritual *being* can be separated from physical *doing*. John, in fact, insists that spiritual being must be validated by physical doing, or else the spiritual being is simply not real. That’s what we saw in 1 John 3:7: ‘Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever *practices* righteousness *is* righteous, as he is righteous.’ The deceivers were saying: You can *be* righteous and yet not *practice* righteousness. John says: The only people who *are* righteous are the ones who *practice* righteousness. Doing confirms being.” (Piper 2009: 146-47) The

reference to God's seed abiding in us (v. 9) reminds us that God is actively present in us (**John 14:17; 1 Cor 2:16; Phil 2:12-13**); therefore, we have the *means* to live righteously and not sin. John ends this section by linking the practice of righteousness with loving one's brother. That statement also transitions to the next section.

- **3:11-18—We are to love the brethren**

<sup>11</sup> *For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another;*  
<sup>12</sup> *not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous.* <sup>13</sup> *Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you.* <sup>14</sup> *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.* <sup>15</sup> *Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.* <sup>16</sup> *We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.* <sup>17</sup> *But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?*  
<sup>18</sup> *Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.*

While the focus of vv. 4-10 was on righteousness, the focus of this section is on love; the two are related. This section repeats and gives examples of a number of the themes that have previously been discussed. The example of Cain's being "of the evil one" (v. 12) exemplifies what John said in v. 8 ("the one who practices sin is of the devil") and his statement in v. 10 concerning "children of the devil." His statement in v. 13 ("Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you") fleshes out or extends his earlier statement, "the world does not know us" (v. 2). In vv. 11-12, 14-16, he fleshes out his prior statements in 2:9-11 and 3:10 about the one who hates his brother versus the one who loves his brother. His question in v. 17 ("But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?") exemplifies his earlier command, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world" (2:15).

John begins by echoing how he began this epistle in 1:1, 5 by talking of "the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." Love is central to Christianity. Our loving the brethren is the sign that we have passed from death to life (v. 14). True love is a matter of "deed and truth" not merely "word or tongue" (v. 18). John's statement in v. 16 that "we know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" is repeating, in substance, Jesus' statement in **John 15:13**, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."

The reason why love is central is because love is from God, because God is love (**1 John 4:7-8, 16**), and we are to be like Him (**Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18**). In fact, "We love, because He first loved us" (**1 John 4:19**; see also **Eph 5:2**). "If anyone ever asks, 'How does the fact that God loves you result in your loving others?' the answer is: The new birth creates that connection. The new birth is the act of the Holy Spirit connecting our dead, selfish hearts with God's living, loving heart so that his life becomes our life and his love becomes our love." (Piper 2009: 157) Love is the primary test or sign for whether someone truly has been born again or not. How central love is to Christian relationships (and to Christianity itself) is seen in the following ways:

- So central is love that Jesus said that the two commandments, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," are the foundation for the entire Bible (**Matt 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28**).
- So central is love that "the one who does not love does not know God" (**1 John 4:8**), and "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (**1 John 4:20**).
- So central is love that it is linked with the forgiveness of our sins (**Luke 7:36-50; 1 Pet 4:8**).
- So central is love that the "goal" of Christian teaching is "love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (**1 Tim 1:5**).
- So central is love that the entire law is fulfilled in the statement, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (**Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14**).
- So central is love that on the night before He died, the "new commandment" Jesus gave His disciples was "love one another, even as I have loved you" (**John 13:34; 15:17**).
- So central is love that "love for one another" is the one sign that Jesus gave by which "all men will know that you are My disciples" (**John 13:35**).
- So central is love that it is the "more excellent way" (**1 Cor 12:31**). It is greater than faith and hope (**1**

**Cor 13:13**). If one does not have love, he is “nothing” even if he speaks with the tongue of men and angels, has the gift of prophecy, has all knowledge, and has the faith that can move mountains (**1 Cor 13:1-2**). If one does not have love, he gains “nothing” even if he gives away everything he owns to help the poor and even gives up his own body to be burned (**1 Cor 13:3**).

- So central is love that “*Fervent love for one another*” is to be shown “*above all*” else (**1 Pet 4:8**).
- So central is love that it is the first of the “fruit of the Spirit” listed in **Gal 5:22-23** and summarizes all of the “fruit of the Spirit” (significantly, the “fruit of the Spirit” is singular, not plural).
- So central is love that it is “*the perfect bond of unity*” which is to be demonstrated beyond all other things (**Col 3:14**).
- So central is love that Scripture calls it “*the royal law*” (**Jas 2:8**).

In this section, John also contrasts the world with the church: the world is characterized by hatred and is exemplified by Cain; the church is characterized by love and is exemplified by Christ. In **v. 15**, John’s statement, “*Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer,*” echoes Jesus’ statement in **Matt 5:21-22** equating anger with murder. **Verses 16-18** make it clear that love, by its very nature, is practical and sacrificial; it must be expressed practically and sacrificially. This may include anything from giving up “*the world’s goods*” (**v. 17**) to giving up one’s own life (**v. 16**). John’s comment about giving up the world’s goods as being the expression of love is akin to James’s statement in **Jas 2:15-17** regarding the expression of faith: “<sup>15</sup>*If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food,* <sup>16</sup>*and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?* <sup>17</sup>*Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.*” Expressing love to the endpoint of sacrificing one’s own life for the sake of others should not surprise Christians, since Christ “*laid down his life for us,*” and we are not greater than our master (**John 13:16; 15:20**). In this regard, the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is exemplified by Cain, who took someone else’s life, versus the Christian, who lays down his own life.

- **3:19-24—We will have assurance from God**

<sup>19</sup>*We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him* <sup>20</sup>*in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things.* <sup>21</sup>*Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;* <sup>22</sup>*and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.* <sup>23</sup>*This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us.* <sup>24</sup>*The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.*

The word “truth” in **v. 18** is the link that transitions to this section. This section also returns to three of the important themes John has repeatedly mentioned earlier: keeping God’s commandments; abiding in Christ; and loving one another. This section primarily concerns our assurance that we are truly “in Christ.” He begins by stressing, “*We will know by this that we are of the truth*” (**v. 19**). He uses the word “know” many times throughout the epistle to tell us how we can be sure of our position in Christ: “*By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments*” (**2:3**); “*If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him*” (**2:29**); “*You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.*” (**3:5**); “*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren*” (**3:14**); “*We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren*” (**3:16**); “*This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.*” (**3:23-24**); “*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God*” (**4:7**); “*By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit*” (**4:13**); “*By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments*” (**5:2**); “*We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.*” (**5:18**). In **v. 19**, the words “*by this*” relate back to the end of **v. 18**, i.e., we know that we are of the truth when we love “*in deed and truth.*” Thus, the assurance of our salvation in Christ is not a matter of speculation but can be known because it can be seen in our lifestyle: we keep his commandments; we practice righteousness; we do not sin; we love the brethren in deed and truth; we believe in the name of Jesus Christ; and we have the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. In fact, **v. 23** joins belief in Christ and love of others as the one overriding commandment—the word

“commandment” in that verse is in the singular (see also **Matt 22:36-40**)

Although our hearts may condemn us from time to time, we have two sources where we may go to find assurance: first, we can step outside of our doubts and look at the objective evidence of our lives of faithfulness, obedience, and love; second, we can appeal to God, who “*is greater than our heart and knows all things*” (v. 20). When our heart does not condemn us, “*we have confidence before God*” (v. 21). As **Hebrews 10** puts it, “*we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus*” and can “*draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*” (**Heb 10:19, 22**).

This confidence affects our prayer life such that “*whatever we ask we receive from Him*” (v. 22). This echoes Jesus’ statement, “*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.*” (**Matt 7:7-8**) It is important to note, however, that the ground of God’s giving us what we ask for is “*because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight*” (v. 22). Both “keep” and “do” are in the present, active tense. As Leon Morris states, “Power in prayer is conditioned not by occasional bursts of obedience, but by lives characterized by obedience” (Morris 1970: 1266). Doing “*the things that are pleasing in His sight*” goes beyond simply keeping his commandments. Rather, it is living a life like that of Jesus himself, who said, “*And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him*” (**John 8:29**). Because of that, Jesus could say, “*I knew that You always hear Me*” (**John 11:42**). To live such a life means that Jesus’ thoughts must be our thoughts; his values must be our values; and his priorities must be our priorities. To do that means that we must “*love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind*” and “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (**Matt 22:37, 39**). To do that means that “all” of our heart, soul, and mind must be toward God all of the time; and to “*love your neighbor as yourself*” means that we must devote the same amount of time, effort, energy, thought, and money to the wellbeing of others as we devote to our own wellbeing. Later in this epistle John adds another important qualification to God’s hearing and granting our requests, namely, our requests must be “*according to His will*” (**5:14**). As James pointed out, “*You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures*” (**Jas 4:3**).

**Verse 24** completes the thought of this passage by telling us that God’s abiding in us, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is the reciprocal of our abiding in him and shows the intimate union that believers have with Christ. All three members of the Trinity are mentioned in **vv. 23-24**. The Spirit’s abiding in us is not merely a “subjective” feeling or experience. Rather, it is an objective fact or condition. Indeed, it is the Spirit who *leads* us (**Rom 8:14**). Through the Spirit “*it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*” (**Phil 2:13**). Thus, it is through the Spirit’s leading and work in and through us that results in our keeping his commandments, practicing righteousness; not sinning, loving the brethren in deed and truth, and believing in the name of Jesus Christ. In short, our lives of faithfulness, obedience, and love are the objective manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s presence and working in and through us.

- **4:1-6—We are to believe in Jesus Christ**

<sup>1</sup> *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.* <sup>2</sup> *By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God;* <sup>3</sup> *and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.* <sup>4</sup> *You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.* <sup>5</sup> *They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them.* <sup>6</sup> *We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*

The reference to the Spirit in v. 24 provides the transition to this section on “testing the spirits” and determining whether a claimed teaching or prophecy is from God or not. Behind every prophet is a spirit: behind true prophets is “*the Spirit of God*” (v. 2) also known as “*the spirit of truth*” (v. 6a); behind false prophets is “*the spirit of the antichrist*” (v. 3) also known as “*the spirit of error*” (v. 6b). For someone to claim to speak when God has not spoken is a serious matter (**Jer 14:14-16; Ezek 22:28; 1 John 4:1-3**). To allow inaccurate prophecies to go unjudged and unchallenged, and to allow people to call themselves “prophets” when they misrepresent God and his Word, can lead to confusion and can lead people astray (**Acts 20:29-30; 1 Cor 11:3; 1**

**Tim 1:4; 4:1-2; 6:20-21**). The NT repeatedly warns against “false prophets” (**Matt 7:15; 24:11; Mark 13:22; Luke 6:26; Acts 13:6; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 2:18; 4:1; Rev 2:20**) and says that the prophet and his or her prophetic message is to be *judged* by the congregation (**1 Cor 14:29-33; 1 Thess 5:20-21; 1 John 4:1**). Jesus said, “*Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.*” (**Matt 7:15-16**) The judging of people claiming to be “apostles” or “prophets” needs to be based on the substance of their teaching (**vv. 1-3**; see also **Acts 17:11; 1 Tim 6:3-5**). The ultimate test is whether or not the spirit “*confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*” (**vv. 2-3**). Coming “*in the flesh*” is important, because what is at issue is that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus. Many people may look up to Jesus as a “great teacher”—Muslims, for example, even call him the “Messiah”—but they deny that he is the divine Son of God who came to earth as a man. What John says in **vv. 1-3** harks back to the discussion of antichrist and the teaching of antichrist in **2:18-23**. In **2:18-23**, confession that Jesus is the Christ determines whether or not the person has the Father; here, confession that Jesus is the Christ determines whether or not the person has the Holy Spirit. People claiming to be apostles or prophets also may be judged based on their lifestyle (see **Matt 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:12-17; Acts 18:3; 1 Cor 9:11-18; 2 Cor 11:7; 12:13**). That is one reason John has stressed throughout this epistle that belief in Jesus Christ must be manifested by lives of obedience, righteousness, and love.

If the so-called “prophecy” is inaccurate, the so-called “prophet” needs to be confronted as a matter of church discipline; the ultimate goal is reformation and restoration to the truth of the Scripture and the community (**Matt 18:15-20; Gal 6:1; Jas 5:19-20**). If the person is repentant, understanding, and learns, then, like Apollos—who taught accurately but incompletely but received correction and instruction from Priscilla and Aquila—God may work through the person in the future (see **Acts 18:24-28**). However, if the person is unrepentant and continues to propagate error in the name of God, he “must be brought before the congregation and dismissed from fellowship as a false prophet (Matt. 18:17; 2 Cor. 11:4, 2 Jn. 9-11). The purpose of such drastic measures is not to create an environment where people fear serving God, but rather a safe community where people fear misrepresenting God (1 Cor. 5:1-5, 13; 1 Tim 5:20).” (Kell 2006: 51; see also **Gal 1:8** [*“Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!”*])

Whereas the focus of **vv. 1-3** is on the nature of the persons who claim to be prophets and the spirits behind them, the focus of **vv. 4-6** is on the nature of the audience or hearers of those purported prophets. Once again, there are only two alternatives: “you” (or “we”) who “*are from God,*” versus “they” who “*are from the world*” and “*are not from God.*” We have “overcome” them because we have not believed their lies or been deceived by them (see **2:22, 26; 3:7**). Although those who are from God “*listen to us,*” those who are not from God do “*not listen to us*”; instead, “*the world listens to them.*” In saying this, John is echoing Jesus, who said, “*He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God*” (**John 8:47**) and “*everyone who is of the truth hears My voice*” (**John 18:37**; see also **John 10:4-5, 8, 16, 26-27**). What John is saying here is consistent with what he has said several times in this epistle, that protection from being deceived and safety from error is found in adhering to the apostolic doctrine which has been taught “*from the beginning*” (**2:7, 24; 3:11**; see also **2 John 5**). He concludes by pointing out that it is the Holy Spirit (“*the spirit of truth*”) in us who causes us to confess that “*Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*” and adhere to the apostolic doctrine which has been taught “*from the beginning.*”

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the differences between the fact that “*God so loved the world*” (**John 3:16**) and the fact that we are *not* to “*love the world or the things of the world*” (**2:15**)?
2. How can reflecting on our new nature and what we have in Christ help us overcome “*the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life*”?
3. What is the “popular” view of antichrist? Discuss the concept of “antichrist” as John (the only person to actually use the term in the Bible) presents it.
4. What are the two great safeguards we have to keep us faithful and secure from the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil and the errors of the antichrists?
5. How do we manifest the truth of the gospel in our lives?

6. How does the expectation of the Second Coming of Christ give us hope, and does that hope have any implications for our lives now?

7. Discuss the nature and characteristics of love, how it should be manifested.

- Although love may be part of other religions, it is central to the very core of Christianity. Why do you think this is the case?
- Since love is central to the very core of Christianity, why is it that many professing Christians and churches do not seem to be particularly loving—certainly no more loving than their non-Christian neighbors. Why do you think this is the case? What can we do about it?

8. How can we be assured that we know Christ, are abiding in him, and have been saved?

9. Some people profess the heretical doctrine known as “name it and claim it” or the so-called “prosperity gospel, namely, that if you want something (generally, money or other material things) all you have to do is ask God for it and “have faith” that he will give it to you, and then he is obligated to give you what you ask for. Evaluate that idea in light of what John says concerning prayer.

10. What are the objective manifestations of the Holy Spirit’s presence and working in and through us?

11. How do we “test the spirits” to determine whether a claimed teaching or prophecy is from God or not?

- Why is it important to do this?
- How should we deal with false prophesies and false prophets in the church?

#### **D. *Walking in Love* (4:7–5:3)**

- **4:7-12—We are to love because God is love**

*<sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.*

John has previously linked believing in Jesus Christ and loving one another: “*This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another*” (3:23). In 4:1-6, he focused on believing in Jesus Christ. Now, he focuses on loving one another. This is the third time John has focused on love: In 2:7-11, walking in love was evidence that a person is in the Light. In 3:11-18, loving one another shows that we have passed from death to life and now have eternal life. Now he gets to the very root and heart of the matter. His point is that love is from God and is the very essence of God. Our loving one another shows that “*God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us*” (v. 11).

In this section, John says “*love one another*” three times (vv. 7, 11, 12). The centrality of love and its relation to God is stressed: love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God; everyone who loves knows God; God is love. The fact that “*God is love*” (v. 8) means that everything God does, whether creating, sustaining creation, ruling, judging, or anything else, is done from love and is a manifestation of his love. The supreme manifestation of God’s love for us was his sending his only begotten Son into the world to do for us what we could never do for ourselves, i.e., live the life we should have lived, die the death we should have died, and bear our sins and pay the penalty for our sins that otherwise we would have to pay but never could.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> All of the biblical passages that talk about Christ as the “*only begotten*” Son (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9) are referring to his *eternal* nature, not to when he became incarnate as a man. The Greek word is *monogenēs*. While some (particularly older) translations of the Bible render it as “*only begotten*,” the actual meaning of the word is “the only one of



Since God so loved us, we ought to love one another. In other words, what he did is the example of how our own lives should be lived. The wording of **v. 11**, “*if God so loved us, we also ought*,” indicates that our love for others should be of a similar self-sacrificing nature as his love for us. We cannot die for the sins of others, but we can live for others and, if necessary, die for them. When we do that, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By saying this, John is saying that, just as God manifested himself by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to the earth, he now manifests himself in and through us, as we manifest his presence in us by our love. Since Jesus Christ is the “*exact representation*” of God’s nature (**Heb 1:3**) and the whole point of our lives is “*to become conformed to the image*” of Jesus Christ (**Rom 8:29**), as we do this, we will become more loving to others, since love is the essence of God. Just as “*everyone who loves is born of God and knows God*” (**v. 7**), John states the converse of that in **v. 8**, namely, “*the one who does not love does not know God.*” The reason, of course, is that anyone who does not have the character of God cannot legitimately claim to have been born of him, and since the essence of God’s nature is love, a person cannot legitimately claim to know him if the person’s own nature is radically different from God’s.

- **4:13-16—We have assurance through the Holy Spirit**

***<sup>13</sup> By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. <sup>14</sup> We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup> Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. <sup>16</sup> We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.***

In **vv. 7-12**, John focused on loving one another. At the end of that section, in **v. 12**, he said that “*if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.*” Now, in **vv. 13-16**, he fleshes out the statement regarding “abiding.” Then, beginning in **v. 17**, he fleshes out how our love is perfected.

In this passage, all three persons of the Trinity are brought together, as they will be again in **5:6-8**. The recurring themes of belief and love are also brought together. John Stott points out that the Father’s sending his Son (**v. 14**) “is not only the chief test of doctrinal orthodoxy but also the supreme evidence of God’s love and inspiration of ours. The divine-human person of Jesus Christ, God’s love for us, and our love for God and neighbour cannot be separated. The theology which robs Christ of his Godhead, thereby robs God of the glory of his love, and robs us of the one belief that can generate a mature love within us.” (Stott 1988: 168) Further, **v. 13** says that “*we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.*” In other words, our ability to believe and love are attributable not only to the act of the Father in sending his Son to us and to the mission of Jesus Christ to do for us what we could never do for ourselves, but also to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us. This presence and work of the Spirit in us provides the ongoing activation and driving power of our love. He is the one who keeps us “abiding” in God and is continually reassuring us of God’s abiding in us.

“Abiding” is mentioned three times in these verses. Each time, abiding is said to be mutual: we abide in God and he abides in us. Additionally, the evidence of this mutual abiding is from different sources: “*because He has given us of His Spirit*” (**v. 13**); “*Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God*” (**v. 15**); and “*the one who abides in love*” (**v. 16**). Thus, the Spirit, our faith, and the outward expression of our faith (love) all work together to reassure us and confirm that God is in us and we are in him. Yet, it is the Spirit who is primary: he is the one who enables us to believe and to love; our faith and love are our responses to his working in our lives (see **Eph 2:8-10**; **Phil 2:12-13**).

In **v. 14** (“*the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world*”), we have the heart and essence of the Gospel. That is a historical fact. However, without the Spirit, our minds are closed and our hearts are cold.

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its kind or class, *unique (in kind)*” (Danker 2000: *monogenēs*, 658, *emph. in orig.*). Zodhiates points out that “John alone uses *monogenēs* to describe the relation of Jesus to God the Father, presenting Him as the unique one, the only one (*mónos*) of a class or kind (*génos*). . . . *Génos*, from which *genēs* in *monogenēs* is derived, means race, stock, family, class or kind. . . . This is in distinction from *gennaō*, to beget, engender or create. . . . So then, the word means one of a kind or unique.” (Zodhiates 1992: *monogenēs*, 995) Confirmation that this is the correct meaning of *monogenēs* is seen in **Heb 11:17** where Isaac is called Abraham’s *monogenēs*. Isaac was not, of course, Abraham’s “only begotten” son, since Abraham also had fathered Ishmael. John Feinberg explains, “The point is that Isaac was Abraham’s unique son. . . . Though Abraham had another son, Isaac was unique in that he, and he alone, was the child of promise.” (Feinberg 2001: 491) When used of Christ, *monogenēs* is “descriptive of the kind of Sonship Christ possesses and not of the process of establishing such a relationship” (Zodhiates 1992: *monogenēs*, 996).

When the Spirit enlightens our minds and regenerates our hearts, we grasp the truth of **v. 14**; we then can “confess that Jesus is the Son of God” (**v. 15**) and “abide in love” (**v. 16**).

- **4:17–21—The perfection of God’s love in us**

*<sup>17</sup> By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. <sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. <sup>19</sup> We love, because He first loved us. <sup>20</sup> If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup> And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.*

In this section, John returns to the theme of the perfection of God’s love in us, first mentioned in **v. 12**. **Verse 17** says “as he is, so also are we in this world.” Although we are not perfect in this world, we abide in him and he in us. As Jesus abides in God’s love (**John 15:10**), so do we (**1 John 3:24**). As Jesus kept God’s commandments (**John 15:10**), so do we (**1 John 2:3-4; 3:22-24**). As Jesus is the true seed of Abraham (**Gal 3:16**), so are we (**Gal 3:29**). As Jesus calls God “Father” (e.g., **John 5:17**), so may we (e.g., **Matt 6:9; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6**). Our love is derived from God’s love for us (**v. 19**). Jesus brought **Deut 6:5** and **Lev 19:18** together in a way no one had ever done before by saying, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (**Matt 22:37-40**; see also **Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28**) In accord with what Jesus said, John likewise says there are two focuses of our love, God and others (**vv. 20-21**). **Verse 20** says, “‘If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.’” As was stated earlier, every human being has been made in the “image of God” (**Gen 1:26-27; 5:1-3; 9:6; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10; Jas 3:9**); how we treat God’s image shows what we really think of Him. So, John is saying that how we do the “second commandment” (i.e., how we love people) is the proof of whether we are really doing the “first commandment” (i.e., loving God). This is the very heart of the gospel and our faith. In **v. 21** he completes this thought by reminding us that love is not a “suggestion” or an “optional extra,” but is a “commandment we have from Him.”

Throughout this epistle, John has had a very practical orientation: our faith is not simply a matter of what we believe, but what we believe is demonstrated by how we act—“practicing the truth” (**1:6**), “walking in the Light” (**1:7**), “keeping his commandments” (**2:3-4**), “keeping his word” (**2:5**), “walking in the same manner as he walked” (**2:6**), “loving our brother” (**2:10**), and “overcoming the evil one” (**2:13-14**). Showing love to others not only shows what we really think about God but is very practical. The world’s plan for relationships is “performance-based.” Acceptance is based on *performance* (“if you do your part, then I’ll do mine”); giving is based on *merit* that is *earned*; affection is given only when one feels that it is *deserved*, or in order to get something from the other person; motivation is based on how one *feels*. The result, as indicated in **1 Pet 3:9a**, is an “evil-for-evil” and “insult-for-insult” relationship, which focuses on “my rights” and “my feelings.” Such relationships are destined ultimately to fail because they are rooted in unforgiving and hardened hearts in which acceptance and affection are based on performance and have to be earned, and the focus is on oneself. The parties to such relationships always feel it is necessary to “get even” when a perceived slight occurs.

Christ’s plan for relationships is “grace-based.” It is based on the nature of God himself: “*God is love*” (**4:8, 16**). God’s plan for relationships reflects the relationship of Christ and his church (see **Eph 5:15-32**). Relationships are based on subordinating oneself to the needs and best interest of the other person, and of the relationship as a whole. Recall that the Greek verb for “love,” from which the noun *agapē* is derived, is *agapaō*, which indicates not only great esteem and deep feelings, but also a *direction of the will* for someone or something that puts the other’s welfare over that of the self (see Danker 2000: *agapaō*, 5; Zodhiates 1993: *agapaō*, 24-25). Motivation for acting this way comes primarily out of love for and gratitude to Christ. In such relationships, love, acceptance, and affection are *freely given*, not earned, because Christ has first loved us and the other person is worthy of such love, acceptance, and affection merely because he or she is a child of God and bears the image of God. When the other person does not meet our expectations, we can *freely forgive* because we were forgiven by Christ and reconciled to God while we were his enemies (**Rom 5:8-10**). The result, as indicated in **1 Pet 3:9b; Rom 12:17, 19, 21; 1 Thess 5:15**, is a “blessing-for-insult” relationship which has its focus on God and his Word, draws upon his strength, and responds with grace and forgiveness when wronged. Such relationships are characterized by harmony, sympathy, a sense of unity (brotherliness), kind-heartedness,

and humility in spirit (**1 Pet 3:8**). The parties to such relationships are devoted to each other and put the well-being of the other first (**Matt 5:40-46; John 13:13-15; Rom 12:10; 14:13, 15; 15:21; 1 Cor 8:13; 10:24; Phil 2:3-9; 1 Thess 5:12-13; Jas 2:1-4; 1 Pet 2:17; 1 John 3:16**). They seek peace and unity (**Matt 5:9, 23-25; Rom 12:18; 1 Cor 1:10; 4:12-13; 10:32-33; 12:14-26; Eph 4:3; Phil 2:1-3**). Consequently, such people demonstrate humility, gentleness, and tolerance (**Matt 5:5; Eph 4:1-2; Phil 4:5; 1 Thess 2:7**). They do not envy each other (**Gal 5:26**) but comfort one another and are kind and forgiving to each other (**Matt 5:7; Rom 12:20; 2 Cor 1:3-5; Eph 4:32; Col 3:10, 13**). Further, unlike relationships based on worldly principles, people who put Christ first do not remove themselves from people of other ethnic groups or tribes (**Gal 2:11-14; 3:28; Col 3:11**) and generously give to help the poor (**Matt 5:42; 2 Cor 8:1-15; 9:6-11; Gal 2:10; Jas 1:27; 2:5-6**). These new ways of interacting with people naturally occur when we realize that in Christ, we are no longer disconnected individuals but are all part of a new family (**Rom 8:14-17; Gal 3:26; 4:6-7; Eph 1:5; 1 Tim 3:15; 5:1-2**) who are intimately connected “*members of one another*” (**Rom 12:5; Eph 4:25**). Such relationships are destined to succeed because they flow out of the character and commands of God himself.

In practically demonstrating love for others, Christian psychologist and marriage counselor Gary Chapman states, “There are basically five emotional love languages—five ways that people speak and understand emotional love. . . . The important thing is to speak the love language of your spouse. . . . Seldom do a husband and wife have the same primary emotional love language. We tend to speak our primary love language, and we become confused when our spouse does not understand what we are communicating. We are expressing our love, but the message does not come through because we are speaking what, to them, is a foreign language. . . . Once you identify and learn to speak your spouse’s primary love language, I believe you will have discovered the key to a long-lasting, loving marriage.” (Chapman 1992: 15-17) Although Chapman was speaking in the context of marriage, the *principles* of the “five love languages” apply to virtually any relationship.<sup>7</sup> The “five love languages” are the following:

1. Words of Affirmation. Words that affirm, compliment, build up, and encourage, are one way to express love emotionally. The “emotional climate” of a marriage is enhanced when a husband and wife use affirming words regularly (i.e., something affirming each day).
2. Quality Time. “Quality time” refers to giving someone your focused, undivided attention. Quality time can include looking at each other and talking while sitting together, taking a walking, eating together, or simply being with each other, doing something you know the other person likes.
3. Giving and Receiving Gifts. A gift is something tangible that shows you have been thinking of the other person. It doesn’t matter whether it cost money; you can make a gift. What is important is that you have thought of the other person, obtained a gift, and gave that gift as an expression of love.
4. Acts of Service. Acts of service are doing those things you know your spouse would like you to do. They can include cooking a meal, setting a table, washing dishes, taking out garbage, changing a baby’s diaper, or cleaning the house. They require thought, planning, time, effort, and energy. You seek to please your spouse by serving him or her. If done with a positive spirit, such acts are acts of love. That is particularly so when the acts of service you do are things that your spouse might normally do (e.g., a husband washing the dishes after a meal to show his appreciation for the meal and his love for his wife).
5. Physical Touch. Physical touch, including holding hands, kissing, embracing, massage, gently stroking the face, and having sexual intercourse, are all powerful ways of communicating emotional love to one’s spouse. For some individuals, physical touch is their primary love language. Without it, they feel unloved. With it, they feel secure in the love of their spouse.

Finally, love which is perfected in us gives us two great benefits: (1) “*we may have confidence in the day of judgment*” (v. 17); and (2) “*perfect love casts out fear*” (v. 18). Those two benefits are related: we do not have to fear the judgment, because Christ has already taken the punishment that we deserved. Consequently, we will not have to endure that punishment. Instead, we can confidently look forward to the judgment, because the judgment will reveal that our deeds have “*been wrought in God*” (**John 3:21**). Further, because we have confidence in the day of judgment, that gives us confidence now, in the present, while we are on this earth. The reason is that our relationship with God is grounded in love, and we no longer have to fear him. He is abiding in us and we in him. Thus, we can have confidence to “*love your enemies*” (**Matt 5:44**). We can have confidence

<sup>7</sup> Chapman’s book is *The Five Love Languages* (Chicago: Northfield, 1992). Chapman himself has written about applying the five love languages in the context of children: Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell, *The Five Love Languages of Children* (Chicago: Northfield, 1997); teenagers: Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers* (Chicago: Northfield, 2010); single adults in general: Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages Singles Edition* (Chicago: Northfield, 2009); and the workplace: Cary Chapman and Paul White, *The Five Love Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* (Chicago: Northfield, 2011).

to express our love practically and sacrificially to anyone, including people who are otherwise unlovable, because, in doing so, we are walking as Jesus himself walked. This is a very high calling. Yet, because he is in us and we in him, and because the same Holy Spirit who led him is in us and leading us, we have all the means we need to be radically loving in an unloving world.

- **5:1-3—The tests of belief, love, and keeping God’s commands summarized**

<sup>1</sup> *Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.* <sup>2</sup> *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments.* <sup>3</sup> *For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.*

In these verses, John summarizes the tests of belief, love, and obedience to the Lord’s commandments. He is showing the essential unity of all three; they cannot be separated. The previous section ended in v. 21 by saying that *“the one who loves God should love his brother also.”* Now, he is telling us that we cannot love God and our brother without believing that Jesus is the Christ, being born of God, and obeying his commandments. These are all linked by being born again, i.e., by being *“born of God”* (v. 1). There is an important grammatical point concerning v. 1, namely, that “believes” is in the present tense and indicates ongoing belief. However, *“born of God”* is in the perfect tense, i.e., *“has been born of God.”* Stott comments that this “shows clearly that believing is the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth. Our present, continuing activity of believing is the result, and therefore the evidence, of our past experience of new birth by which we became and remain God’s children.” (Stott 1988: 175)

These verses show the family relationship among believers. Hence, what is (or should be) true in earthly families (a person should love both his parents and his siblings) is true with our heavenly family. So natural is this that in v. 2, John essentially states the converse of 4:20. There, he said that *“the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”* Here, he says that *“we know that we love the children of God, when we love God.”* Either way, love for God and love for others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, are mutual: you can’t have one without the other. Our love for God also entails our observing his commandments (vv. 2-3). This shows us, again, that true love is not simply a set of emotional feelings, but necessarily involves action. Doing this should be as natural as loving our brothers and sisters, since God’s will is *“that which is good and acceptable and perfect”* (Rom 12:2). God is all-wise and all-loving. His will is working everything out for our good (Rom 8:28). Therefore, we can trust him in everything. To obey his commandments is a yoke which is easy and a burden which is light (Matt 11:30).

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. This entire section has focused on the importance of love:

- What is the basis for our love?
- Why is love so important for our Christian walk?
- Why are love for God and love for others to be mutual?
- How do we demonstrate our love for God?
- How do we demonstrate our love for others?
- What do you think of the “five love languages”? What is your primary “love language” and, if you are married, what is your spouse’s? How do you demonstrate the “five love languages” in your life?
- Are there practical steps that churches can take to make love a more central part of our being and to make love a more visible reality to people outside of the church?

2. In 4:13-16, it refers to “abiding in God” three times. What does it mean to “abide in God”?

3. What roles to the Holy Spirit play in our lives, both in bringing us to Christ and in our ongoing lives as Christians?

4. **4:17** speaks of love being perfected in us, “*so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment*”? How do you feel about the day of judgment?

- Are you looking forward to it, or not, and why?
- If you are afraid of the judgment, what can you do to obtain the “confidence” about which **4:17** speaks?

5. Why is it so often that we naturally love our earthly families more than we love our heavenly, spiritual family (i.e., our brothers and sisters in Christ), even though our earthly families are only temporary, but our heavenly, spiritual family will last forever?

- How can we increase our love for our heavenly, spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ?

#### ***E. Our faith in Christ overcomes the world and gives eternal life (5:4-13)***

- **5:4-5—Through Christ we overcome the world**

*<sup>4</sup> For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*

This section flows from **vv. 1-3**, since it speaks of being “*born of God*” and believing in Jesus as do **vv. 1-3**. As a result, many commentators include **vv. 4-5** as part of one paragraph which began in **v. 1**. However, **vv. 4-5** introduce a new theme which is repeated three times, namely “overcoming the world.” Further, the focus here is on our “faith” (a term not otherwise used in 1 John), and the last part of **v. 5** focuses on who Jesus is, which thereby introduces the next section (**vv. 6-13**), where the focus is on the person of Jesus Christ and the result that our faith or belief in him has for us. Consequently, I think that it is appropriate to see these verses as the beginning of the next major section of the epistle which concerns how our faith in Christ overcomes the world and gives eternal life.

In **v. 4**, John begins by speaking of “whatever” is born of God, not “whoever” (the Greek word is neuter, not masculine or feminine). He is emphasizing the power of being born of God which enables us to overcome the world, not the person who is born of God. The power to overcome the world is from God—he is the one who gave us our new birth. His acting in our life has resulted in our faith (**v. 4**), our belief (**v. 5**). This gets us to Jesus. He is the object of our faith, since our faith is “*that Jesus is the Son of God.*” In other words, he is the one who has all power and is the one on whom we rely and focus our lives.

These verses get us back to **2:15-17**, which spoke of our relationship with the world and said, “*Do not love the world nor the things in the world.*” The only other place in the Bible where the phrase “*overcome the world*” is found is what Jesus said of himself in **John 16:33**, “*These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.*” Jesus overcame the world through his death on the cross and subsequent resurrection and ascension. Now, through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, he gives us the power to overcome the world.

As we have seen, our faith and belief in Christ is to be characterized and demonstrated by obeying Christ’s commandments, which, in turn, is manifested by living lives of righteousness and love. As Paul put it in **Gal 5:6**, what matters is “*faith working through love.*” Thus, as we “*walk by faith*” (**2 Cor 5:7-8**), we can have confidence both in this life and in the day of judgment, because the Son of God himself has already won the victory over the world and is now in us, empowering us to do likewise (**John 14:17-18; Phil 2:12-13; Heb 13:5**).

- **5:6-13—Our faith in Christ gives eternal life**

<sup>6</sup> *This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.* <sup>7</sup> *For there are three that testify:* <sup>8</sup> *the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.* <sup>9</sup> *If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son.* <sup>10</sup> *The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son.* <sup>11</sup> *And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.* <sup>12</sup> *He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.* <sup>13</sup> *These things I have written to, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

The “*water and blood*” reference in **v. 6** has puzzled some commentators, who have come up with different interpretations of what John means.<sup>8</sup> It is referring to something that happened in the past (Jesus “came” by water and blood). Further, it is the “*water and blood*” that testified or identified that Jesus was the Christ who “*has come in the flesh*” (**4:2**) and is “*the Son of God*” (**3:8; 4:15**). The most satisfactory understanding is that the water signifies his baptism and the blood signifies his death. At his baptism, Jesus was identified by God the Father as the Son of God (**Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22**) and was empowered by the Holy Spirit to begin his mission on earth. At his death, he completed his mission, inaugurated the New Covenant in his blood, and was identified as the King of the Jews and the Son of God even by his enemies (**Matt 27:37-42, 54; Mark 15:26-32, 39; Luke 22:20; 23:38-42, 47; John 19:19**). The Holy Spirit also testifies that Jesus is the Christ who has come in the flesh and is the Son of God. **Verse 6b** begins, “*It is the Spirit who testifies.*” Grammatically, that is a present participle, which indicates continuing activity. He is the one who regenerates our heart and opens our eyes to the fact that Jesus is Lord (see **1 Cor 12:3**). Without the Spirit, none of us would even seek God (**Rom 3:11**). Thus, the three (water, blood, and Spirit) all testify and are in agreement (**vv. 7-8**): the water and the blood are objective, historical testimonies of who Jesus is; the Spirit is the internal, subjective, and experiential testimony of who Jesus is.<sup>9</sup>

In **vv. 9-10**, John makes clear that God is behind all the testimony concerning who Jesus Christ is. In **v. 10**, there are two statements that appear to be opposites: “*The one who believes in the Son of God*” and “*the one who does not believe God.*” The way they are phrased indicates that believing in the Son of God and believing God are equivalent. That follows, of course, from the fact that the Son of God (Jesus Christ) is God incarnate. This section is emphasizing that Christ is the object of all the testimony. This is important because, although many people claim to believe in “God,” it is believing in Jesus Christ—that he is the Son of God, that he is God himself come to earth as a man—that separates Christianity from every other religion and belief system. To not believe this is to reject the only true God and to make God a liar. **Verses 11-13** tell us what is at issue concerning believing the testimony that Jesus Christ is the Son of God: only through believing in Jesus Christ that a person has eternal life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. Thus, the stakes are of infinite importance.

These verses are also pointing out three important facts concerning eternal life: First, eternal life is a *gift from God* to us; it cannot be earned but is given by God’s grace (see **Eph 2:8-9**). Second, eternal life is found *only* in Jesus Christ; there is no other source of eternal life in the entire universe. Third, eternal life is a *present possession*; although it is not fully manifest in all its aspects, it has been inaugurated in us now. The eternal life which we have in Jesus “is not to be construed as more time to fill (merely ‘everlasting’ life), but life at its scarcely imagined best, life to be lived” (Carson 1991: 385). In other words, eternal life is not merely life that goes on forever but is a different *kind* of life and begins now. It is a life like Jesus’ own life. Jesus said, “*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life and have it abundantly*” (**John 10:10**). Jesus’ life was not limited only to what some people think of as “spiritual” matters (prayer, reading the

<sup>8</sup> Different views have included the ideas that the water and blood represent the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the water and blood that came out of Christ’s body at his crucifixion when he was pierced with the spear, and Christ’s birth and death (see DeYoung 1989: 1185).

<sup>9</sup> In **v. 7**, after “*For there are three that testify,*” the KJV and NKJV include the following additional words “*the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.*” Although those words appeared in a fourth-century Latin treatise, they are not found in any Greek manuscripts before the fourteenth century, none of the early church fathers ever quoted them, and they are not included in any of the early translations of the Bible, including the Latin Vulgate. Thus, they are clearly not part of the original epistle, as written by John (see Stott 1988: 182-83).

Bible, etc.). Rather, Jesus demonstrated that true life, the abundant life he gives, is holistic and applies in all areas of life. As one writer puts it, “Jesus went about practicing the abundant life in full view of everyone. His kind of living substituted service for self-aggrandizement and trumped self-absorption by paying attention to others’ needs. Jesus proved that this approach to life paves the way to abundance.” (McNeal 2009: 31)

This eternal life, which we receive when we turn to Christ as our Lord and Savior, affects all aspects of our lives: (1) All those who are united to Christ by faith have assurance of their salvation. If salvation depended even in part on our own efforts, we could never have the assurance that we had “done enough” to merit salvation. However, because God-in-Christ did for us what we could not do, Christians can and do have assurance that they are and forever will remain saved (**John 3:36; 6:37, 47; 11:25; 1 John 5:11-12**). (2) Being saved and united with Christ changes the legal status of Christians. “The cross liberates from the power of sin, propitiates God’s wrath, washes away the guilt and stain of sin, reconciles believers to God, and achieves cosmic victory over deadly spiritual foes” (Demarest 1997: 196). (3) Being saved and united with Christ changes Christians on the inside. When one comes to Christ, he or she receives a new heart (**Ezek 36:26; 2 Cor 3:3**), the mind of Christ (**1 Cor 2:16**), and the Spirit from Christ (**Ezek 36:26; John 14:17**). (4) Being saved and united with Christ gives Christians an intimate, personal relationship with God through Christ. Christians can “draw near with confidence to the throne of grace” (**Heb 4:16**; see also **Heb 7:19**) because Christ is “in” believers (**John 14:20; 17:23; Rom 8:10; Gal 2:20; Eph 3:17; Col 1:27; 1 John 3:24; Rev 3:20**) and believers are “in Christ” (**Rom 8:1; 12:5; 16: 6, 7, 9-10; 1 Cor 1:2, 30; 4:10, 15; 15:18, 22; 2 Cor 1:21; 5:17; 12:2; Gal 1:22; 3:28; 6:15; Eph 1:3; 2:6, 10; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 2:14; 4:16; 1 Tim 3:13; 2 Tim 3:12; Phlm 23; 1 Pet 5:14**). (5) Being saved and united with Christ gives Christians a new motive and means of living. Because Christ is in us and we have a new heart, new mind, and new Spirit, his values and priorities become our values and priorities. He is working in us and through us to make us just like himself (**Rom 8:29; Phil 2:12-13**). (6) Being saved and united with Christ creates a new humanity (**John 3:3; Rom 6:4; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15**); believers are adopted into God’s family as his children (**John 1:12; Rom 8:14-17, 23; 9:4; Gal 3:26; 4:5-7; Eph 1:5; 2:19; 1 John 3:1**) and become deeply related to each other as brothers and sisters (e.g., **Matt 12:50; Acts 1:16; 6:3; 11:29; 12:17; 16:40; 18:18; 21:7, 17; Rom 14:10; 1 Tim 5:1-2**). (7) One day, Christ will return and renew the entire world and all of creation (**Rom 8:18-23; 2 Pet 3:3-13; Rev 21:1-11**). That is when our eternal life will be experienced in all of its glory in our new bodies on the new heaven and new earth.

In v. 13, John identifies those to whom he has written this epistle (“*you who believe in the name of the Son of God*”) and his purpose in writing this epistle (“*so that you may know that you have eternal life*”). This epistle is therefore unlike the Gospel of John which was written to unbelievers in order “*that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name*” (**John 20:31**).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is “overcoming the world,” and how do we do it?
2. What are “*the water and the blood*” (vv. 6, 8), and how do they testify about Christ?
3. Describe the “eternal life” that we have in Jesus.
  - In what ways does it affect us?
  - How do we apply it?

#### **F. Closing Instructions and Exhortations (5:14-21)**

- **5:14-15—God hears our prayers according to his will**

*<sup>14</sup> Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.*

John previously had discussed confidence in connection with Jesus’ coming back to the earth (**2:28**) and the judgment that his return entails (**4:17**). Now, he speaks of our having confidence in our prayer life, in the “here-and-now” of our earthly existence. John’s mentioning the “confidence” we have in God flows naturally

from our knowing that we have eternal life (v. 13).

In **3:22**, John had discussed God’s answering our prayer. There, he said that “*whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.*” Now, he says that “*if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us*” (v. 14). His “*hearing us*” is the equivalent to his granting us the petitions that we have asked of Him (v. 15). Prayer is not a tool to manipulate God or to try to bend him to our will. Rather, it is a way of seeking his will, embracing it, aligning and subordinating ourselves to it. This is not saying anything new but was already included in the Lord’s Prayer, “*Your will be done*” (**Matt 6:10**). It was also demonstrated by Jesus himself in his prayer to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane when he said “*not what I will, but what You will*” (**Mark 14:36**).

So-called “prosperity” teachers often indicate that if one prays for material wealth God is required to grant it. They base this on such Scriptures as **Matt 7:7-8** (“*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened*”) and **Mark 11:23-24** (“*Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, “Be taken up and cast into the sea” and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you*”). Neither passage supports or has anything to do with prosperity teaching. To the extent that they deal with prayer, those passages are concerned with making sure that we have the proper object and focus (i.e., God, not money) and the right character and lifestyle (i.e., humility and forgiveness, not greed). In **Matt 7:7-8** the immediate context deals with not storing up “treasures on earth,” the impossibility of serving both “God and wealth,” and that we are to rely on God alone and not seek the material things that the Gentiles seek after (**Matt 6:24-34**). Further, in context, prayer must arise out of a holy life in which we do not judge others, but take the “log out of our own eye” before we deal with the “speck that is in our brother’s eye,” and in which we “treat people the same way you want them to treat you” (**Matt 7:1-5, 12**). The parallel passage in **Luke 1:9-13** says that the “good gifts” the Father will give us when we ask, seek, and knock is the Holy Spirit, not money. In **Mark 11:23-24** the immediate context deals with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem as the Messiah, his driving the money changers from the temple, his cursing the fig tree (symbolic of the faithless nation of Israel), and his responding to the Jewish leaders who questioned his authority by telling the parable of the vineyard owner, by which he was saying that the kingdom would be taken away from Israel and given to Jesus’ New Covenant people who believe in him (consisting largely of Gentiles) (**Mark 11:1-12:12**; see also the parallel passage **Matt 21:1-46**). Further, in context, the object of our faith is to be God, not material riches (**Mark 11:22**), and our prayers are to arise out of a holy life of forgiveness (**Mark 11:25-26**).

The wider biblical discussion of prayer makes clear that no passage says or even implies that God will “do our bidding” and must give us whatever material things we want and ask for in prayer. In fact, such a concept of prayer is virtually the opposite of the biblical requirements for effective prayer. Several passages show this:

- **John 15:7** (“*If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you*”). “Abiding in Jesus” is the first condition for prayers to be answered. This concept is discussed by D. A. Carson, “*If you remain in me* is teased out in vv. 9ff., and is there equivalent to doing all that Jesus commands; *If . . . my words remain in you* is another way of getting at the same truth. Jesus’ *words (rhēmata)* are all the individual utterances that together constitute Jesus’ “word” (v. 3; *logos*). Such words must so lodge in the disciple’s mind and heart that conformity to Christ, obedience to Christ, is the most natural (supernatural?) thing in the world. . . . Conformity in one area ensures conformity in the other; a test in the observable area of obedience to Christ is a test of the unseen area of genuine spiritual vitality. All this is equivalent to remaining in the vine; that is the union out of which fruit is produced. To cast it in terms of prayer, such a truly obedient believer proves effective in prayer, since all he or she asks for conforms to the will of God.” (Carson 1991: 517-18)
- **Jas 4:3** (“*You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures*”). Our motives for praying must be right—but desire for money and things to spend on ourselves is a wrong motive; in fact, such a motive is greed, which is idolatry and brings the wrath of God (**Col 3:5-6**; see also **Eph 5:5**). Further, the focus of our prayers should not be self-centered—however, the appeal of the prosperity gospel, by its very nature, is an appeal to selfishness.
- **Jas 5:16b** (“*The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much*”). To be effective the one praying is to be a “righteous” man. That means that he has been saved, has “*the mind of Christ*” (**1 Cor 2:16**), and is being conformed to the image of Christ (**Rom 8:29**). To be like Christ is the opposite of the prosperity mindset. Further, the context of **James 5** begins with a severe condemnation of the rich (**Jas 5:1-**



6) and goes on to bless those who suffer like Job (**Jas 5:7-11**), both of which concepts are contrary to the prosperity mindset.

- **1 John 3:22** (“*Whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight*”). Receiving what we ask is conditioned on obeying Christ’s commands and doing the things that are pleasing to him. Seeking after and living for riches and luxury neither obey any command of Christ nor are pleasing to him, but are the exact opposite of how he lived.
- **1 John 5:14-15** (“*This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him*”). Answered prayer is conditioned on asking “*according to his will*” (not according to our own will). God does not serve us; we serve him. This passage, again, directly contradicts the prosperity gospel.

When John conditions prayer on asking “*according to His will*” (v. 14), doing that naturally brings in all of these other conditions to effective prayer. In short, all of these things amount to one thing, or may be seen as different aspects of the same thing, namely, having the “*mind of Christ*” (**1 Cor 2:16**) or, to put it another way, being “*conformed to the Image*” of Jesus Christ (**Rom 8:29**).

- **5:16-17—Sin not leading to death**

*<sup>16</sup>If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. <sup>17</sup>All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.*

In vv. 14-15, John dealt with prayer requests according to God’s will. Now he deals with a specific example or application of prayer—not a petition or request for the petitioner, but an intercession for somebody else. **Verse 16** is showing the inevitable and spontaneous result of when we see a brother or sister sinning, namely, “*he will ask.*” Our lives are not to be self-centered, but others-centered. We need to be aware of the lives of our brothers and sisters. We need to be mutually accountable to each other. And when others are getting off the path where they should go, we need to take their situation to the Lord and intercede for them so that they may be restored.

These verses also raise the issue of different types of sin. **Verse 17** rightly says, “*All unrighteousness is sin.*” However, there is a distinction between “*sin leading to death*” and “*sin not leading to death.*” There is some debate over what is the “*sin leading to death*” versus the “*sin not leading to death.*” Some think that the “*death*” referred to is physical death. There is an indication of this in **Acts 5:1-11**, regarding Ananias and Sapphira, **1 Cor 5:5**, regarding a man in the church who was sleeping with his father’s wife, about whom Paul said, “*deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus,*” and **1 Cor 11:29-30**, which speaks of taking the Lord’s Supper, and says, “*For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.*” The “*sleep*” referred to in v. 30 is physical death. On the other hand, if the idea is that some sins cause people to be sick, which then leads to death, sickness is not mentioned in this passage, all the other references to life and death in 1 John are spiritual, not physical, and that appears to be the case here. Also, there is nothing that gives us any guidance to discern which illnesses are or are not fatal (see Stott 1988: 189n.1). The “*life*” which is contrasted with “*death*” in v. 16 appears to be spiritual life, not physical life. If that is so, then, to maintain the contrast, the “*death*” also should be spiritual, not physical.

If the “*sin leading to death*” does not refer to physical death, then what is it? Some commentators contend that the “*sin leading to death*” is apostasy, i.e., the denial of Christ and renunciation of the faith that once had been professed. They cite such passages as **Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-30; and 12:16-17**. However, in this letter, John has written that a true Christian “*cannot sin,*” i.e., persist in sin (**3:9**), and “*We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him*” (**5:18**). Further, John has written that we have “*eternal life*” and “*you may know that you have eternal life*” (**5:11, 13**). Additionally, we who have believed have been “*sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit*” (**Eph 1:13**), not just temporarily, but “*sealed for the day of redemption*” (**Eph 4:30**). Since that is the case, a true Christian cannot apostatize in that sense and, therefore, cannot commit the “*sin leading to [spiritual] death.*” The person committing such a sin would have to be a non-believer. That appears to be the case with the false teachers John discussed earlier in this epistle. “*They went out from us, but they were not really of us*” (**2:19**). They are “*antichrists*” who do “*not have the Father*” (**2:23**) and are “*children of the devil*” (**3:10**). The same applies if it is contended that the “*sin leading to death*” is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (see **Matt**

**12:22-32**). There, the Pharisees (nonbelievers in Christ) were deliberately rejecting known truth and attributing the good work done by the “Spirit of God” (**Matt 12:28**) through Christ to the devil (Beelzebub).

In one sense, of course, *all* sins lead to death, since God said in **Ezek 18:20**, “*The soul who sins shall die*” (see also **Rom 5:12; 6:23; Jas 1:15**). Indeed, we all were “*dead in trespasses and sins*” (**Eph 2:1**). That is the very reason why Christ came, to redeem us and give us new life. Thus, while the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit may be part of what John has in mind here, the concept of “*sin leading to death*” is probably broader than that. There is no article before the word “sin” (i.e., no “a” or “the”). That indicates that John is not talking about a specific sin, but rather is talking about a more general state of *being* in sin. As Leon Morris says, “We should regard *mortal sin* as a state rather than an act. There is no one specific sin men commit which we can call *mortal*, but there is a state of sin, of being in rebellion against God which John elsewhere characterizes as remaining in death (3:14).” (Morris 1970: 1270) In short, all nonbelievers are in that state of being in sin (**Rom 14:23**). They will continue in that state until they repent, confess they sin, and turn to Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Some have concluded that “*sin not leading to death*” is sin that “is the result of ignorance rather than a deliberate sin” which is done by a fellow believer (Ngewa 2006: 1535; see also DeYoung 1989: 1186). DeYoung says that “the background is probably the Old Testament distinction between inadvertent sins, for which there was sacrifice, and deliberate ones, for which there was no sacrifice—only God’s mercy could intervene (see Lev. 4; 5:15-19; Num. 15:27-31; Ps. 19:13)” (DeYoung 1989: 1186). Those holding this view take the word “brother” (**v. 16**) to be a fellow Christian. The fact that the person “*sees his brother sinning*” suggests an ongoing relationship within the family of faith. And the phrase “*he will ask*” indicates the inevitable and spontaneous result that arises (or should arise) when we see a brother or sister sinning. The word “life” that the sinning brother-in-Christ will receive is “life in the sense of assuring the believer as he repents that he has eternal life (abides in the Son and in life, 2:24; 3:6; 4:13; 5:11-12)” (DeYoung 1989: 1186). Others conclude that John appears to be using the term “brother” in a broader sense than referring to a fellow believer, i.e., he is using “brother” in the sense of “neighbor” (see **Luke 10:25-37**).<sup>10</sup> That is also indicated by the fact that, if the believer prays for the person who commits “*sin not leading to death*,” the sinner receives “life”; since “life” has repeatedly been used in the sense of “*eternal life*” throughout 1 John (**2:25; 3:14, 15; 5:11, 12, 13, 20**), receiving “life” indicates that the person committing the “*sin not leading to death*” was *not* spiritually alive at the time of his or her sinning, i.e., he or she was not born again, was not a Christian, just as is the person who commits “*sin leading to death*.”

Whenever we see anyone sinning—whether the person is a Christian, someone whom we know is not a Christian, or if we do not know the person’s spiritual state—we naturally should be moved to pray for him or her. When John says at the end of **v. 16**, regarding sin leading to death, “*I do not say that he should pray about that*,” he is not saying that there are certain people we should *not* pray for. After all, we do not know the spiritual state of other people, and sometimes even the worst anti-Christians have come to Christ as a result of our prayers. The statement is unclear. Perhaps John was doubting the efficacy of prayer for those who are hardened in their sin, although it seems to me that those are the very people we *should* be praying for—that God would open their eyes and their hearts and that they would receive new life!

- **5:18-21—Remain in Christ**

<sup>18</sup> *We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.* <sup>19</sup> *We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.* <sup>20</sup> *And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.* <sup>21</sup> *Little children, guard yourselves from idols.*

Each of the three affirmations in **vv. 18, 19, and 20** are introduced by “*We know*.” This is a term John has used multiple times throughout this epistle to remind Christians of the assurances they have in Christ. **Verses 8-19** take us back to **3:4-10**. The wording in **v. 18** is important. When it says, “*We know that no one who is born of God sins*,” the words “*who is born of God*” are a perfect participle. This indicates that our new birth has continuous and ongoing effects. The word “sins” is also in the present, active tense, which implies

<sup>10</sup> When one looks at the other uses of “brother” in 1 John (**2:9, 10, 11; 3:10, 12, 15, 17; 4:20, 21**) the term is ambiguous (except in **3:12**, where it is used of Cain’s brother Abel) and could apply in the sense of a fellow Christian or one’s “neighbor.”

continuity and habitual conduct. Although we may commit acts of sin (**1:8-9; 2:1**), we do not persist in it, we do not live in it or glory in it; rather we are convicted by it, repent of it, and confess it.

The next phrase, “*but He who was born of God keeps him,*” is ambiguous. Some of the Greek manuscripts say, “*but the one who has been born of God keeps himself.*” If this is the correct translation, it is giving us a reason why we do not continue in sin, namely, we keep ourselves from sin by using the means of grace God has given us, i.e., the Holy Spirit, our new hearts, the mind of Christ, the Word of God, and our brothers and sisters in Christ. The idea of “keeping oneself” is also found at **1 Tim 5:22; Jas 1:27; 1 John 3:3; and Jude 21**. Other Greek manuscripts follow the translation above. In this wording, “*He who was born of God*” refers to Christ. If this is the correct translation, it is telling us, not that we keep ourselves from sin, but that Christ keeps us. That idea is also found at **Rom 8:38-39; 1 Pet 1:5; and Jude 24**. The verse is thus telling us that because Christ keeps the Christian, the Christian does not persist in sin, and therefore the devil does not touch him. In this way, we are kept from the evil one (see **John 10:28; 17:12, 15**; see also **Matt 6:13**).<sup>11</sup>

**Verse 19** is taking us back to **2:15-16** where John said, “*Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.*” Now he is telling us another reason why we are not to love the world or the things of the world—because “*the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.*” John is echoing Jesus who called Satan the “*ruler of this world*” (**John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11**) and Paul who called him the “*god of this world*” (**2 Cor 4:4**) and the “*prince of the power of the air*” (**Eph 2:2**). As he has indicated earlier in this epistle, John is again pointing out that there are only two alternatives: every person is a part of “we” or of “the world”; he or she is either “*of God*” or “*in the power of the evil one.*” We are not “*in the power of the evil one*” Rather, we are in Christ and Christ is in us; we are in God and God is in us; we are in the world but not of the world; we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption. We can “*resist the devil and he will flee from you*” (**Jas 4:7**). We need to remember these things, recognize that we are living in “enemy territory,” and make full use of the means of grace God has given us, in order to “practice the truth” (**1:6**), “walk in the Light” (**1:7**), “keep his commandments” (**2:3-4**), “keep his word” (**2:5**), “walk in the same manner as he walked” (**2:6**), “love our brother” (**2:10**), live lives of righteousness, and thereby “overcome the evil one” (**2:13-14**).

**Verse 20** is probably the most fundamental affirmation of this section. It takes us back to the foundation of our faith, which John has repeated multiple times, namely, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who has come in the flesh (**2:22; 4:2-3; 5:1, 5**). “*Him who is true*” and “*in Him who is true*” are both probably referring to God, since John has previously spoken of our being or abiding “*in Him*” and “*in God*” (**2:5, 6, 27, 28; 3:6; 4:13, 15**). Here in **v. 20**, he then brings out that we are “*in Him*” (God) because we are “*in His Son Jesus Christ.*” We cannot be in the Father without being in the Son (**2:22-23**; see also **1 Thess 1:1**). Grammatically, the last sentence of **v. 20**, “*This is the true God and eternal life,*” typically would relate back to the immediately preceding reference, namely, Jesus Christ. If that is the case, it is a strong affirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ. That makes sense because it is only because of the full deity of Jesus Christ that to be in Christ is to be in the Father. On the other hand, some commentators take the last sentence as relating back to God the Father on the ground that the three references to the “true” (“*Him who is true,*” “*in Him who is true,*” and “*the true God*”) are all to the same person (see Stott 1988: 198). Those repeated references to “*Him who is true*” and “*the true God and eternal life*” as relating to the Father finds support in that they strongly echo **John 17:3**, “*This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*” Either way, God the Father and God the Son are shown here in the closest possible relationship. Whichever person one views the last sentence of **v. 20** as relating to, Jesus Christ is still seen as fully God, either implicitly or explicitly.

In **v. 21**, John ends this epistle rather abruptly with the warning “*guard yourself from idols.*” In doing this, he is ending his book with the counterpart of **v. 20**. Just as **v. 20** dealt with the fundamental aspect of our faith and of eternal life, namely, who Jesus Christ is and being in God through being in Jesus, so in **v. 21** he deals with the fundamental sin that keeps us from God, from Jesus, from salvation, and from eternal life, namely, idolatry. What is idolatry? In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Timothy Keller says, “What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.” (Keller 2009: xvii) An idol itself is not necessarily a

<sup>11</sup> The last petition in the Lord’s Prayer is “*deliver us from evil*” (**Matt 6:13**). The actual wording in Greek has the definite article (“the”) before “evil,” so it reads “*deliver us from the evil*” (Greek = *tou ponērou*). Consequently, several translations render it (or place this variant in the margin) “*deliver us from the evil one.*” For various reasons, this may be the better translation or understanding of this petition (see Dennert 2022). If so, **v. 18**, above, is showing us how that petition is answered.

“bad” thing—anything can be an idol. In fact, our idols generally are the *good* things in our lives that we turn into *ultimate* things. Keller explains, “The human heart takes good things like a successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things. Our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfillment, if we attain them.” (Keller 2009: xiv) That is why **Ezek 14:3** says “*men have set up their idols in their hearts*” (see also **Ezek 14:4, 7**).

It is no surprise that the very first of the 10 Commandments pertains to idolatry, “*I am the Lord your God. . . . You shall have no other gods before me*” (**Exod 20:2-3; Deut 5:6-7**). This is foundational because, when we violate any of the other commandments, we are also violating the first. Thus, if I steal something, it means that, at that moment, I wanted that thing more than I wanted God; if I commit adultery, it means that I wanted that person more than I wanted God. As Samuel Ngewa puts it, “All one needs to be an idolater is to choose to believe or do something that is opposed to the will of God” (Ngewa 2006: 1536). In short, the reason we commit any sin is because we are committing idolatry; we are putting *ourselves and what I want* first. One can view idolatry ultimately as self-centeredness.

Christians, especially those in Christian ministry, can be particularly prone to this. They easily may turn spiritual gifts, ministry success, and doctrinal correctness into idols. There is a particular lure that traps many men in the ministry which reveals that they are, in fact, idolaters, even though they think they are being faithful and even sacrificial in their ministry—that is their use of time, which reveals what their true values and priorities are. Many men say that “God has called me” to be a pastor, or an evangelist, or some other form of ministry. As a result, they spend most of their time in the church or on the mission field, away from their wives and children, and end up neglecting and not supporting their wives and children financially, emotionally, relationally, and in every other way. They think to themselves, “Lord, look what I am sacrificing to you.” They fail to realize that they were also “called by God” to be married and have a family. Men who think and act like this fail to realize that, by neglecting their wives and families, they are *no longer qualified to be a leader in the church*, since being able to “*manage your own household well*” is *one of the qualifications* to even be in church leadership (**1 Tim 3:4-5**). Although such men think they are earning great rewards from God by making such “sacrifices,” the only thing they are doing is storing up for themselves *judgment*.

For the person in ministry, one’s spouse is to be his or her first priority, since she or he is to be “*one flesh*” with you (**Gen 2:24**). Further, the marriage relationship is to be a model of the relationship between Christ and the church (**Eph 5:25-32**). One’s children are the second priority. Your spouse is a higher priority than the children because they will leave your home to form their own families. They are to be brought up in the ways of the Lord (**Deut 6:6-7; Eph 6:4**) but will leave home to marry and begin their own families. The children’s faithfulness and respect for their parents is another *qualifying requirement* to be a leader in the church (**1 Tim 3:4; Titus 1:6**). Therefore, they are a higher priority than one’s work in the church. Your and your spouse’s parents are your third priority. Your spouse is a higher priority than your parents because you both have left your parents to form your own family. Children (including you and your spouse) always have an obligation to honor their parents and to take care of them in time of need (**Exod 20:12; Eph 6:21-3; 1 Tim 6:4, 8**).

Additionally, your neighbors and those outside of the family (i.e., people in the community) are the next priority of the person in ministry. There are two reasons for this. First, how we treat other people directly demonstrates whether we love God (**Matt 22:39-40; 1 John 4:20-21**). Our demonstrating love for others includes both believers and unbelievers, those who like us and those who do not (**Matt 5:43-48; Gal 6:10**). Second, our reputation with those outside the church is another *qualifying requirement* to be a leader in the church (**1 Tim 3:7**). Therefore, other people are a higher priority than one’s work in the church.

The church is important, but we are only qualified to serve in the church if we first have our other priorities in proper alignment. Our work in the church must be according to our own particular gifts and calling (**Rom 12:3-13; 1 Tim 4:14**). Our work in the church should not be at the expense of our other relationships. Too many leaders put their work in the church higher than their calling to love God, to be a Christ-like husband, father, son, and to love their neighbor as themselves. However, failure in those other areas speaks louder to your congregation than the sermons you preach. We should plan and schedule our church and ministry time well so that we can be as efficient as possible. However, one reason for doing that is so that we will have more time to spend with the people we love and who are closest to us. This is called maintaining “work-life balance.”

The above discussion of idols and idolatry flows directly from the way John has worded **v. 21**. He uses the definite article (“the”) before the word “idols” (Greek = *tōn eidolon*). This suggests that the idols he is referring to were not just idols in general, but were known idols. Stott even suggests that the phrase may be translated as “*from your idols*” (Stott 1988: 198). Known idols suggest the “idols of the heart” we are all prone to, including how we spend our time. Given his immediately previous discussion of the fundamental aspect of

our faith (Jesus Christ and our being “in God” through being “in Christ’), and his repetitive stress throughout the epistle of living righteously by “practicing the truth” (1:6), “walking in the Light” (1:7), “keeping his commandments” (2:3-4), “keeping his word” (2:5), “walking in the same manner as he walked” (2:6), “loving our brother” (2:10), and “overcoming the evil one” (2:13-14), he is wise to end his epistle by warning us against the great, fundamental danger that can shipwreck our faith and our life—and which can be so subtle that we may not even recognize it.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the conditions John in this epistle and the wider context of Scripture give for God’s hearing our prayers and granting our requests?
2. Discuss the so-called “prosperity teachers” view of prayer: how does it differ from the Scriptural view of prayer?
  - Why are so many people enticed by the “prosperity teachers” view of prayer and what they teach?
  - What can we do to counter the “prosperity teachers”?
3. What is the “*sin leading to death*” (v. 16)?
  - Can Christians commit the “*sin leading to death*”? Why or why not?
4. What is the “*sin not leading to death* (vv. 16-17)?
  - Can Christians commit the “*sin not leading to death*”? Why or why not?
5. What are the means of grace God has given us to keep us from sinning and to overcome the evil one?
6. What is the fundamental foundation of our faith?
7. What is idolatry?
  - What kind of idols do you see in the lives of the people you know?
  - What kind of idols do you see in the church and people in the church?
  - What kind of idols to you see in your own life?
  - Why can idolatry be so subtle and dangerous?
  - What can we do to combat idolatry?

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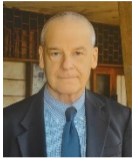
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### **THE AUTHOR**



Jonathan Menn lives in Appleton, WI, USA. He received a B.A. in political science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with honors, in 1974, and was inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa honor society. He then earned a J.D. from Cornell Law School, magna cum laude, in 1977, and was inducted into the Order of the Coif legal honor society. He spent the next 28 years practicing law, as a civil trial attorney, in Chicago and then as a partner at the Menn Law Firm in Appleton, WI. He became a believer and follower of Jesus Christ in 1982. An increasing love for theology and ministry led to his pursuing a Master of

Divinity at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL. He received his M.Div. from TEDS, summa cum laude, in May 2007. Between 2007-2013 he was the East Africa Director of Equipping Pastors International. Now Jonathan is the Director of Equipping Church Leaders-East Africa ([www.eclea.net](http://www.eclea.net)). His extensive written teaching materials on biblical subjects are available at [www.eclea.net](http://www.eclea.net). Jonathan may be contacted at: [jonathanmenn@yahoo.com](mailto:jonathanmenn@yahoo.com).