

Shepherding Notes

1 John

By *Caleb Bunch*

Intro

John's style during this introduction should feel very familiar to you. Just like John 1:1, he begins by focusing on "the beginning." In his gospel account, John began by referring to Jesus as the Word (logos). Here, we see that he speaks of Jesus as "eternal life." As you read these opening words, look at the way it reads if you replace the words "life" and "eternal life" with the name of Jesus: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning Jesus. Jesus was made manifest, and we have seen him, and testify to him and proclaim to you Jesus, who was with the Father and was made manifest to us." The point John is making is this: if you have Jesus, you have eternal life. If you don't have Jesus, you do not have eternal life.

Fellowship

The book of 1 John is all about examining yourself so that you may know that you are saved. John doesn't obscure that fact — he states it plainly at the end of the book: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:13) This book is designed to bring assurance to those who know Christ. John achieves this by drawing a number of sharp lines in the sand and explaining how our conduct reveals on which side of that line we stand.

In this first chapter the question is that of fellowship. "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (vs. 6–7) Fellowship means acceptance and community. Notice that John is intentionally connecting the idea of fellowship with God and fellowship with the people of God. Those who live in perpetual, unrepentant sin cannot have true fellowship with either.

If/Then

Did you notice that verses 6–10 are designed to be a series of positive and negative responses to verse 5? Verse 5 is the grounding truth: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." Look at how it breaks down through the rest of the chapter.

- Negative — vs. 6: "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."
- Positive — vs. 7: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."
- Negative — vs. 8: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."
- Positive — vs. 9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
- Negative — vs. 10: "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

"If you have Jesus, you have eternal life. If you don't have Jesus, you do not have eternal life."

Today we are going to consider three observations and three applications from this chapter.

Observation 1 — The Word "Know"

One of the best ways to see what an author is attempting to emphasize is by looking for repetition. One of the most repeated words in 1 John is the word "know." It appears 32 times in just 105 verses. Many of those appearances are used as tools for self-examination. 1 John 2:3 is a perfect example: "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments." As we make our way through this book, look for similar self-examination tools.

Application 1: Verses 3 and 6 are mirror images of the same concept. The point being made is that true Christians keep the Lord's commandments, and therefore walk (or live) in the same manner as Jesus did. This is a high calling. Examine your life now and see if there are any ways that you know you have not been living like Christ. If so, repent and imitate Jesus. That is the regular pattern of life for those who know the Lord.

Observation 2 — Light and Darkness

The natural bent of the human heart is to love the world and the things of this world and hate our brothers. The heart of the saved person is inverted to be right way up. John uses the term "light" to speak of those who have been saved and "darkness" to speak of those who are not saved. Another evidence that someone has been truly transformed by Christ is that they will genuinely love people more than they love possessions, power, or prestige.

Application 2: Do you genuinely love others? Do you sacrificially live your life by putting the needs of others before your own? "But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes." If you are harboring hatred in your heart toward anyone, repent and walk in the light.

Observation 3 — The Occasion for Writing

The occasion for writing this letter is made plain by verses 18–27. There was a group of people who had departed from the church because they had come to believe a false

gospel. John makes it clear that the reason they fell sway to this false teaching and departed the church was due to the fact that they "were not of us" — that is to say, they were never truly saved. As is true with most false teachings, the doctrine that was under attack was regarding the person of Jesus Christ. John points out that all who deny the truth about Jesus are both liars and "antichrist."

Application 3: We are told in this chapter the way to reject false gospels and false doctrines: "abide in him." (vs. 27–28) If you have been truly saved by grace, the Scripture and the Holy Spirit will make clear to you if there is something being taught that is outside the bounds of orthodoxy. The best way for you to solidify yourself in a firm foundation of faith is to commune with the Lord through the Word and through prayer. Abide in Him and you will remain and bear much fruit.

"Abide in Him and you will remain and bear much fruit. The best defense against false teaching is communion with the Lord through the Word and through prayer."

There are two ways to tip a canoe — to the right or to the left. Similarly, there are two ways that someone could take the first half of this chapter and misunderstand it. Let's start by looking at the phrase that is often confused. In the ESV, the phrase is rendered as anyone who "makes a practice of sinning." Consider the range of translations:

- KJV — "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin..."
- NKJV — "Whoever has been born of God does not sin..."
- NIV — "No one who is born of God will continue to sin..."
- NASB — "No one who is born of God practices sin..."
- CSB — "Everyone who has been born of God does not sin..."
- ESV — "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning..."

Is this saying that a person will hear the gospel, repent, believe, and then never sin again? No. If you remember back to the eighth verse John wrote in this book, he fervently rejects the idea of sinless perfectionism: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." So then, what does it mean that those who are born of God do not make a practice of sinning?

Tip the Canoe Left

There are some who add a word to this phrase in order to make it more palatable. They will say that this is only speaking of habitual sin. Here is the problem with adding a qualifying word like that. It can be really easy for someone to make a semantic argument and say something to the extent of, "I don't make a habit of this sin, I only do it once a month or so." For the person who leans in this direction there is a general acceptance of sin in their life. They refuse to deal with sin issues because they do not believe God is as serious as the Scripture says He is about repenting of our sin in an ongoing way.

Tip the Canoe Right

On the other hand, there are those who have the opposite problem. Instead of tipping in the direction of indulgence, they lean toward viewing themselves as unsaved because

they have not been able to live a perfectly sinless life. Passages like this one can shake a sensitive conscience to the core.

What Does It Mean?

Let's not tip the canoe. What is God trying to tell us here? It is that anyone who is truly in Christ will not go on in regular, repeated, unrepentant sin. Christians can certainly fail, but if God's seed abides in him or her, that person will feel the guilt of their sin and turn to the Lord for forgiveness. David is the most notable example in all of Scripture. He was able to bury his conviction for a time. But King David was utterly convicted when Nathan pointed his finger into his face and said, "You are the man." His response was not to defend himself or deflect the blame. He acknowledged his sin and turned away from it.

The true Christian may sin, even grievously. Even so, no true believer will go on living in open, hidden, or unrepentant sin without eventual conviction of the heart, confession to those harmed, and correction of their life.

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God IS Love

There are many ways that the Bible describes what God is like. His attributes, His character, and His works are scattered onto every page of Scripture. But, when it comes to the essence of who God is, there is only one attribute that the Bible utilizes. God IS love. Love is not merely something that God chooses to do. It is the nature of His being. It is not wrong to say that God has love or gives love or does loving things. But all of those expressions spring forth from the existential core of what makes God, God.

Consider for a moment the Trinitarian implications of this incredible declaration. Perhaps the easiest way to explain is to contrast Biblical Christianity with other mono-theistic belief systems like Islam, Christless Judaism, or Jehovah's Witnesses. All of those systems believe that God has existed forever in eternity past. However, none of them believe that Jesus or the Holy Spirit existed in eternity past. This has significant implications when it comes to the core nature of God. Those systems cannot agree with the idea that God is love because they do not believe that God had anyone to love for most of eternity. Love requires an object in order to actually be love.

The God of the Bible has existed for all eternity as one God, but three persons. God has expressed perfect love within the Godhead forever. The Father has always loved the Son, and the Son has always loved the Father. (John 17:24) God's other attributes — such as wrath, justice, mercy, kindness, longsuffering — were never expressed in eternity. God is just, He expresses wrath, He shows kindness, He offers mercy. That is what God is like, it is how He conducts Himself. But, beneath all of those actions remains the bedrock foundation of the identity of God as a God of infinite, unbreakable, eternal, pervasive love.

This truth should shape how we live in two ways. First, we who know the Lord should recognize that the gospel is all about Jesus bringing us into that eternal love that was shared within the Trinity for all eternity. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love." (John 15:9) If you are in Christ, you have been brought into union with the Father's love. Christian, know that you are loved, always.

Secondly, if we have experienced this love from the Lord, it should be expressed in the way we relate to others. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." Loved people love people. Does your life reflect that you have been the recipient of love? If so, you will find yourself growing in sacrificial, deliberate, humble love for others.

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"By This We Know..."

vs. 2

Don't miss the fact that there are two parts to the equation in verse 2. The Pharisees in Jesus' day were very good at following rules. However, Jesus contradicted their self-assessment and informed them that they were actually children of the devil. How could it be that someone so outwardly righteous was actually an enemy of God? Because they did not love God. How can we know that for sure? Because when the Son of God Himself was in their presence, they responded with disdain, abhorrence, and fury.

There is also the opposite type of person who claims to love God, but lives in open rebellion to all of His commands. That person is also self-deceived because they perceive the concept of love for God very differently than God does. According to Scripture, "this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments." (vs. 3) This means both that the way God loves us is by graciously providing us with commands that are always good for us, and that true love for God is always accompanied by obedience from us. The reason that John can say the commands of the Lord are not burdensome is because the true believer delights in honoring the Lord.

"I Write These Things..."

This book is designed to force the reader headlong into a position of self-evaluation. If you were paying close attention, this book rarely ever provides direct commands. Rather, John has been encouraging us to lay our lives out in front of ourselves so that we can take a realistic diagnostic test of our faith. But what is the point of all this self-examination? Surely it is so that we can take stock of all the places where we need to grow, right? Well, that is definitely a by-product of faithful, gospel-centered self-evaluation, but that is not the goal that John had in mind. The purpose for which the Holy Spirit inspired this book was to provide you with richly tangible assurance of your salvation. Not flimsy assurance based upon the swiftly changing tides of emotion. We who are in Christ can stand firmly in confidence, knowing that we have truly been given eternal life.

"Keep Yourselves from Idols"

The last verse in this book may be one of the most abrupt shifts found anywhere in the New Testament. Why does John land the plane by talking about idols? This is the first

time he has mentioned idols in the entire book. The argument that makes the most sense to me is this. Although the word "idol" has not been used to this point, the concept of idolatry is all over these pages. All of the tests of faith and genuine salvation set two ways of life against each other. On one side there is the way of life that comes from knowing and worshiping God. On the other side there is the way of death, darkness, rebellion, hatred, and separation. An idol is anything that we set in the place of God. When we reject God's way for our own, we are making ourselves, our plans, our comfort, our name, our legacy, our wealth, or any number of other things into an idol. John is making clear that any rejection of these words is a form of idolatry — and that is to be avoided at all costs.

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