

Witnesses to the TRUTH



A Study of John's Letters

LESSON 1: INTRODUCTION AND 1 JOHN 1:1-2:2



INFORMATION FOR TEACHER

John's letters should be an enjoyable study to facilitate. The sections are short and the topics for discussion are plentiful. Don't let the short sections deceive you, though. Even though most lessons cover fewer than fifteen verses, there is a good deal of important content and your class may want to explore various ideas at a greater depth. Therefore, it will be important to plan your time well to get through the material.



BIG IDEAS

- *Sin has no place in our lives, but we have an advocate (Jesus Christ) when we do sin.*
- *Claiming to be without sin is just deceiving ourselves.*



DISCUSSION

- *Is it possible to eventually live a sinless life? In other words, can we get to a place in our life where we no longer sin?*



INTRODUCTION

We probably know John best for his gospel, which stands alone in style and content compared with the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). We may also think of the book of Revelation. John's letters (written in the late part of the first century and probably after his

gospel), however, receive less attention and are much shorter. This is a shame, because they contain some rich material to help people become more fully devoted followers of Christ.

Like Paul, John is credited with having founded several congregations, so John is likely writing to his “family” of congregations, though he doesn’t name an audience specifically in his first letter. This unnamed audience is struggling with some specific problems, though. John writes of some opponents (1 John 2:18-19; 4:1-3) but doesn’t name them specifically. We can tell what some of the problems were, though, since John addresses some of the problems caused by these opponents.

As best as we can tell, these “opponents” were those who were leaving the true faith to follow offshoot teachings that resembled Christianity but were not *true* Christianity. These offshoot teachings were varied, but one thing they seemed to have in common was a denial of the *humanity* of Christ (perhaps an early form of *docetism*). These people could not affirm that a divine being could actually be human and suffer pain like a human.

Docetism (from the Greek word “to seem”):
the belief that Jesus’ physical body (and thus, his crucifixion) was simply an illusion (i.e., seemed to be human but wasn’t).

Often in these letters, John will emphasize the teaching that Jesus really was human – this wasn’t just an illusion. As one author writes, “Jesus really came in the flesh, and to refuse to affirm this is heresy.”¹ If Jesus was not human, then his suffering is irrelevant to the human condition; conversely, if Jesus was not divine, then he is incapable of bringing salvation. Both are necessary!

John is worried about the damage these opponents are continuing to cause, so **he writes to the congregations he founded to remind them of the true gospel and to encourage them to hold fast to that teaching**. Or as Bruce puts it, the letter is a “message of encouragement and reassurance, sent to a group of Christians who were perplexed and bewildered by recent happenings in their midst.”²



THE BIBLICAL TEXT

1 John begins with a prologue (1:1-4) and then launches into its material in 1:5.

¹ D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 40.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 25.

I. 1 John 1:1-4

Read 1 John 1:1-4

We notice right away that this letter doesn't start with the greeting we might expect, and as we find with many of Paul's letters. The author doesn't name himself or his audience, but rather moves straight into the material.

A. Resemblance to John's Gospel

Read John (the gospel) 1:1-5

- **What similarities do you notice to the opening of 1 John?**

Notice them side-by-side, with key words in common in bold:

1 John 1:1-4

*¹ That which was from the **beginning**, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the **Word** of **life**. ² The **life** appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal **life**, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴ We write this to make our joy complete.*

John 1:1-5

*¹ In the **beginning** was the Word, and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God. ² He was with God in the **beginning**. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was **life**, and that **life** was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

John's gospel seems to intentionally resemble the opening of Genesis ("In the beginning...") and this letter is an even more distant echo. In his gospel, John wants us to see Jesus as the Word that has existed eternally. In the *letter*, it seems when John is talking about the "Word" he is also talking about the gospel (the *message*). In other words, in the Gospel of John, John begins by emphasizing Jesus Christ; in this letter, John begins by emphasizing the *gospel* itself. (This will become important later as John begins to remind his readers of the things Christians must believe about the gospel, since some of them seem to be forgetting the teachings that were handed down to them.)

Even putting it next to John's gospel, the language of this letter is still confusing. We have to wait until the end of verse 1 to find out that all the "that whiches" and "whiches" are referring to the "Word of life." It might help us to re-word these verses to sound more like how we speak and write – perhaps like this:

Our theme is that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we beheld and our hands handled. Our theme, in short, concerns the word of Life – that Life which was made manifest. Yes, we have seen and we bear witness; we make known to you the Eternal Life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us. What we have seen and heard we make known to you also, in order that you in your turn may have fellowship with us.³

B. Jesus was a real human being

- ***What “sense” words does John use to describe his experience with Jesus?***

Notice the emphasis on the *senses*: we have *heard* (1:1,3), *seen* (1:1,2,3), *looked at* (1:1), and *touched* (1:1). John is reminding his readers that he is an eyewitnesses to the things about which he is writing; he writes from a place of firsthand knowledge, lending credibility to what he will say.

Also, John is firing an opening shot against those who are causing problems in the Johannine churches – those who were denying Christ’s humanity (see introduction section above). If Christ had not come in the flesh, he could not have been properly “seen” and certainly not “touched.” Jesus was a real human being.

C. The goal is fellowship – with God and with each other

The proclamation of the gospel should lead to fellowship (v. 3). In John’s mind, you are either in fellowship with light or with darkness (see 1:6-7). This stark contrast leaves little room for anything in between. To be in “fellowship with the light,” we must be in fellowship with each other and with God. These two things are interdependent – that is, we cannot be in fellowship with God without being in fellowship with each other. There is no room in scripture for “I have Jesus, but I don’t need the church.”

II. 1 John 1:5-2:2

Read 1 John 1:5-2:2

John starts off by defining the message he is trying to convey to his audience: “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1:5).

- ***What does it mean to say “God is light?” What kinds of things do we associate with “light”?***

³ Bruce, 34.

A. "If we say..."

John proceeds to elaborate on the statement in 1:5 by discussing three "if we say" statements that some of his readers might be in danger of believing. These three statements have a similar structure:⁴

1:6	1:8	1:10
<i>If we say we have fellowship with him</i>	<i>If we say we have no sin,</i>	<i>If we say that we have not sinned,</i>
<i>while we are walking in darkness,</i>		
<i>we lie</i>	<i>we deceive ourselves</i>	<i>we make him a liar,</i>
<i>and do not do what is true.</i>	<i>and the truth is not in us.</i>	<i>and his word is not in us.</i>

We might say that this section is making a strong connection between what we **say and believe** and what we **do**. These verses address the danger of **saying/believing** we have fellowship with God but **doing** things associated with darkness.

B. Walking=behavior

In the Bible, "walking" is often used to describe our broader behavior, as seen in the following verses:

Psalm 1:1

*Blessed is the one
who does not **walk** in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mocker*

Psalm 15:1-2

¹ *LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent?
Who may live on your holy mountain?*

² *The one whose **walk** is blameless,
who does what is righteous,
who speaks the truth from their heart*

⁴ Charted adapted from R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 257.

Romans 6:4 (ESV)

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

How we “walk” is a way to talk about our general *conduct*. And for John – and the rest of scripture – our *conduct* must match our *belief* and our *words*.

- **What does it mean to “walk in the light?”**

C. Can we sin, or not?

As soon as we move to verse 7 we encounter something confusing. John has just told his readers in verse 6 that they can’t walk in darkness, yet in verse 7 he warns them not to claim to be sinless, lest they deceive themselves. And in verse 8 he gives a similar warning, this time cautioning his readers against claims of sinlessness, lest they make *Christ* a liar.

How does this work together? Sin clearly has no place in the life of the believer. John even says that one of his purposes in writing is so his readers will not sin (2:1). Yet John chastises claims of sinlessness.

As Smith puts it,

There seems to be an unresolved tension [here]...On the one hand, Christ died for sin, so that its continued existence in the believer is unthinkable. Yet exist it does, even in the Christian, as 1:8 and 9 would seem to acknowledge (cf. 2:1). Nevertheless, in principle sin is conquered and must be rooted out.⁵

It seems that 2:2 is a beginning point to answer this. John wants them *not to sin*. Immediately, however, he interjects the word “but” and proceeds to say that if/when people *do* sin, they have an advocate in Jesus Christ. Because of *his* sacrifice, our sins can be forgiven (more on this in later lessons).

D. The solution

If 1:6, 8, and 10 are three negative “if we...” statements, then perhaps 1:7 and 1:9 are the antidotes:

1:7	1:9
<i>If we walk in the light</i>	<i>If we confess our sins</i>

⁵ Smith, 44.

as he is in the light

we have fellowship with one another

and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

he is faithful and just

and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

In summary, instead of claiming to be without sin, we should walk in the light and confess our sins. In doing this, we will have fellowship with a faithful and just God and with each other instead of deceiving ourselves and making God a liar. In the end, this kind of life is purified of all sin and unrighteousness by Jesus.



PUTTING SCRIPTURE TO WORK

- ***What would it mean for you to “walk in the light” at home? At your workplace?***
- ***One author writes, “...on the one hand, there can be no truly Christian fellowship with that which is opposed to Christ’s redemptive work, but on the other hand, there can be no truly Christian fellowship that is not as inclusive as God’s love.”⁶ What is he saying about the boundaries of Christian fellowship? How does that work out practically for us?***
- ***Are there some actions of yours that don’t match your words or your beliefs?***
- ***Knowing what you know about Jesus’ sacrifice, what is your attitude toward sin?***
- ***How does the command to confess your sins (1:9) work out in your life?***



FOR NEXT WEEK

Read 1 John 2:3-11.

⁶ Culpepper, 255.