

Epistles of John (Student)

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Lesson One

Believers Desire to Expand Their Fellowship

Text: 1 John 1:1-4

The effect of time on human thinking is often astounding. As the first century neared its close, some said, "It did not happen! It is a cunning lie! People who believe the Christian message are gullible escapists who deceive people!" What did not happen? God did not send Jesus! Jesus was not divine! Jesus was not raised from the dead! In all ages people's reasoning is often time-dependent. If something occurred that is not within "my" experiences, then "it did not happen if I did not see it."

Confidence in the accounts of happenings and the happenings themselves tend to decrease as passing time increases.

Paul, before his death which occurred a little past mid-first century, said regarding Jesus' resurrection, "Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). Two observations made from Paul's statement concerning this lesson are: (a) A significant group in the Christian community were skeptical about Jesus' identity, death, and resurrection long before 1 John was written; (b) Paul said confidence in Christian teaching without confidence in Jesus' identity, death, and resurrection were useless and purposeless. There is no eternal reason to accept Christian behavior if the person rejects the resurrection.

The point: some Christians questioned Jesus' identity, death, and resurrection long before 1 John was written. To question Jesus' resurrection was to question God's determination to resurrect humans. To discount human resurrection was to render Christian teachings meaningless.

John in the writing of 1 John would issue some demanding challenges. No one would take John's requests seriously; no one would be moved to obey those requests if Jesus were not genuine. If Jesus was who Christians claimed he was, there was reason to

take John's challenges seriously. If Jesus was not divinity resurrected, there was no reason to take John's requests seriously. John's requests were much too demanding if Jesus was a deceitful fraud!

The authors of writings in the New Testament (and the Bible) did not write a document just for the sake of writing. They wanted to document reasons that would reinforce good behavior or change bad behavior. There was no reason to accept John's behavioral challenges unless they understood Jesus Christ's real identity.

Consider the manner that John began 1 John:

(1) The emphasis is on "we." What occurred was not the result of the witness of one person, but the witness of numerous people. More than the character of a person was to be considered. The character of the entire group was to be considered. More was involved than a person's reaction to John.

No one individual is liked or believed by everyone. When a group are witnesses, there is the testimony of many. Greater strength lies in group witnessing.

(2) I, John, was among the "we." I am one of the eyewitnesses. I do not speak of what I was told. I speak of what I witnessed. I was not deceived, and I am not seeking to deceive you.

John was one of those witnesses. He was one of those people who heard, saw, and touched. He was not speaking from "hearsay" but from personal experience. He sought confidence.

(3) I am not sharing with you an impression, a day-time vision or a night-time dream. No personal interpretation is involved. The basis of my challenges are physical reality. My challenges are based on hearing, seeing, touching--the fundamental elements of being a witness.

He was not speaking from an impression gained from others, but from direct personal experience that involved his physical senses.

(4) In regard to Jesus, he is "from the beginning," is "the Word of Life," and was revealed to us by God the Father. Jesus is nothing less than a manifestation from God. From the source of life, John declared to them life. If they wanted to know about the Father, they needed to listen to His son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Messiah whom God promised to send long before Jesus was born.

Jesus is older than the existence of humans (consider Jesus' statement in The Gospel of John 8:56-58), the source of life, and God's revelation.

(5) John wants his original readers to understand clearly his message is from God the Father through Jesus Christ. John seeks no credit for what he is about to say. The

message is from "we" witnesses who heard, saw, and touched. These witnesses declared only what God manifested in Jesus Christ. If John's readers clearly grasp Jesus' identity, their understanding will have a profound impact on their behavior.

His message is from God, not from himself. God, not John, declared Jesus' identity and origin. The credit for John's message belongs to God, not to John or to the witnesses. The witnesses only declare what God made plain.

Your attention is focused on the core reason for John and the witnesses sharing this message. When a person understands who Jesus is, the person does not wish to keep the understanding to himself/herself. John wanted to proclaim the message to his readers so they could have the same thing he and the other witnesses had. Note that to have what the witnesses had did not require being a witness. It required believing in Jesus Christ as the manifestation of God. That which believers received would not be inferior to what witnesses had. Witnesses sharing what they had in Jesus Christ would not diminish what they had. The result of witnesses sharing would be the fullness of joy.

The core reason focused on sharing what they understood. They wanted to generate more believers with whom to share fellowship. Sharing fellowship with those who place their confidence and selves in Christ increases the joy of believers. By sharing, they have more joy.

As has been said many times, when one who is in Jesus shares Jesus, he/she has no less. In fact, that Christian has more--his/her joy is greater! Sharing Jesus makes us more important to God, not less important. We share Jesus because we know all people are important to God, not just "us."

The determination of God to share with us verifies our importance to God.

For Thought and Discussion:

1. Often, what effect does the passing of time have on human thinking?

If something not within "my" experiences occurred, then "it did not happen if I did not see it."

2. In our emphasis today, what did Paul say about resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19?
 - a. *Some people in the Christian community were skeptical about Jesus' identity, death, and resurrection long before 1 John was written.*
 - b. *Confidence in Christian teachings without confidence in Jesus' identity, death, and resurrection were useless and purposeless.*
3. What would John issue in the writing we know as 1 John?

He would issue demanding challenges.

4. Christians would not take John's requests seriously unless what was true?

They would not take his requests seriously if Jesus were not genuine.

5. In John's introduction, on who did he place emphasis?

He placed emphasis on "we."

6. Who was among those people?

John was among those people.

7. Rather than sharing an impression, what was John sharing?

John was sharing the basic realities of being a witness--hearing, seeing, touching.

8. What did John say about Jesus?

He is from the beginning, the Word of life, and revealed to them by God the Father.

9. What did John want his original readers to clearly understand about his message?

He wanted them to clearly understand that his message was from God the Father through Jesus Christ.

10. What was the core reason for John sharing this message?

When a person understands who Jesus is, he/she wants to share that understanding. He/she wants to produce more believers and share fellowship with those believers.

Lesson Two

God's Perfect Solution to Sin

Text: 1 John 1:5-10

The purpose of this lesson: To stress the incredible things God does for Christians in providing the forgiveness that sustains our salvation.

This lesson is intended to challenge you to think. It is not intended to seek agreement with all it presents. You are asked to study the scripture and think. You are not asked to defend past concepts or to refute the concepts presented. You are asked to think to seek understanding. The essence of your faith is founded upon your understanding. For the sake of a living faith in Jesus Christ, think rather than react.

Emphasize these facts (a) we learn when we reflect on challenging thoughts; (b) those thoughts make us study to learn because such thoughts open us to consider concepts that are "new" to us; (c) such reflection and study produce understanding; (d) understanding results in a deeper faith in Christ.

There are several deeply complex studies/searches in scripture. One is a study of what scripture frequently refers to as the Law, and one is a study of human redemption. Neither the space for this lesson nor your time together will allow an in-depth study of either. For that reason, you are asked to consider some basic concepts.

Things that are true are often complex. Such concepts are not easily understood.

Concept one: The problems associated with the Law were not flaws in the law (Exodus 20:1-18). The Law was from God through Moses to Israel. There was no evil in the source. God is not the author of evil. There was no misrepresentation of God's will in Moses. Moses represented God well. No one had the relationship with God that Moses had (Exodus 33:11; Numbers 12:8; Deuteronomy 34:10). The problem was in the people of Israel--and would be in us! The defects or flaws were in those who received the Law! The Law came from the perfect God. Imperfect people could not represent themselves to the perfect God on the basis of their own behavior! Perfect obedience could not be produced by imperfect people.

Stress that the Law of itself was good and came from the source of absolute goodness. (We often assume because of what we have heard that anything in the Old Testament is of little or no value. A serious study of Deuteronomy would prove insightful and mind changing.)

The result is found in concept two. God had to do for people what they could not do for themselves. Since human behavior could not be the basis of salvation, divine behavior had to be the basis of salvation. That is the reason Jesus came to be Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). Salvation is not "fair" and never has been. God did both parts for us to be

saved. He did both parts in Jesus. He sent Jesus who had/has a relationship with the Father no one else had/has. Jesus, as a fleshly human, did what none of us could do-- he did the will of the Father perfectly (see such passages as John 1:1-5; 1:14; 1:17, 18; 3:16-21; 3:34; 5:19; 5:30; 6:38; 8:28; 12:49, 50; 14:10). He used his blood to atone for our sins (Romans 3:21-26). All of us are redeemed from sin and given to God for service because Jesus died for us! Divine forgiveness replaced perfect human behavior. Divine forgiveness made it possible for humans to begin again, new and fresh, repeatedly.

Revealing godlike behavior was not enough. Humans proved themselves incapable of being perfectly obedient with motives focused on God's priorities. Thus, in Christ, God presents humans a way to belong to Him when humans continue to be flawed. This means of belonging is based on divine forgiveness rather than perfect human behavior. This focus does not remove obedience--it focuses on the reason for one's obedience.

Just as Jesus' death atoned for our evil, Jesus' resurrection provides Christians the certainty of hope (see 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 and note verses 57, 58). This hope is not the uncertain expectation of human wishes, but the certain expectation resting in the promises of God who cannot lie (see Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:13-20, noting verse 18).

God's solution to our sinfulness focuses on the double-pronged approach of atonement and hope (understand that hope is not human wishing but the certainty of a divine promise).

Concept three is the perfect means of our salvation. This concept is affirmed by John in today's text. (1) God is the source of light (sinlessness) Who is absolutely free from any form of evil. (2) Those who claim fellowship with God while deliberately (intentionally) living a godless life are liars who do not *practice* the truth (revealed in Jesus). (3) There are two evidences that a person has oriented himself toward a lifestyle of light instead of darkness. (a) He/she has fellowship with Christians and (b) exists in the cleansing of Jesus' blood (he/she trusts that cleansing is an act of God, not their own achievement). (4) If we declare we have no need of God's cleansing (we have no sin), we are self-deceived and void of God's truth. (5) However, if any Christian confesses his/her sins, God will (a) forgive the confessed sin and (b) cleanse the person from *all* unrighteousness. (God will forgive us of sins we are and are not aware of). (6) If we persist in declaring we do not need God's solution, we make God a liar and God's truth is not in us (to say we do not need what God says we need declares God is lying).

John affirmed that God's approach through Christ to our sinfulness is a real solution to a real problem. Instead of ignoring the continuing problem of human sinfulness, it provides for it. It provides by God doing what we cannot do through His forgiveness, and we doing what we can do by being honest with ourselves and God. The key is that the Christian trusts God to honor his promise to forgive. Even having confidence in forgiveness is a matter of placing faith in God.

Several things are called to your attention. (1) This scripture does not say if Christians are perfect in their behavior they will be forgiven. Perfect Christians do not need forgiveness. This whole scripture was written to Christians who knew they needed forgiveness. To deny sinfulness was to exclude oneself from God's forgiveness.

Stress God's solution is not about "perfect" people who need no forgiveness, but sinful people in Christ who need forgiveness.

(2) It is a serious offense against God to withhold the fellowship of Christians with Christians. Only in extreme situations where Christians were reverting to a godless lifestyle from a Christian lifestyle was this to occur (1 Corinthians 6). In the first century, local Christians formed a community that enabled believers in Christ to belong and receive care.

Fellowship has not received the positive significance the writers of the New Testament give it. It was primarily an encouragement to be righteous through helping those who placed confidence in God through Christ.

(3) Twice John wrote God would forgive a Christian of all sin if, as a penitent person in Christ, he/she would acknowledge (confess) the sin as he/she became aware of the sin. God in His forgiveness would do no less for the Christian than He does for the believing sinner who is baptized. For the Christian with a penitent heart who willingly confesses mistakes when he/she is aware of them, divine forgiveness is an ongoing reality in daily life. He/she lives in divine forgiveness. Certainly, he/she can exit a divinely forgiven lifestyle (2 Peter 2:20-22). However, he/she can live in that lifestyle by maintaining a penitent heart that confesses.

No one knows all the sinfulness he/she is guilty of. A perfect knowledge of all evil within a person would eliminate every person from salvation. If a Christian is honest with himself/herself upon a discovery of personal sin and honest with God through confession (accepting responsibility) for the evil, God forgives him/her of all unrighteousness in his/her life.

(4) This is a workable solution to human sinfulness! Humans can repent, confess, and trust God! Their commitment in Christ requires honesty with God, not perfect behavior! Any believing person honestly committed to Christ can live daily in divine forgiveness.

In this solution, people are capable of doing what is required of them--being honest with self and God.

What an affirmation of God's caring for humans! God cares about us so much that He produced a workable situation that assured salvation for all who will trust His accomplishments in Jesus Christ. Salvation in Jesus Christ is "doable" for any person anywhere who places confidence in God's achievements in Jesus Christ.

God's solution to our need is a constant, continuing evidence of the fact that He cares for us.

For Thought and Discussion:

1. What is this lesson intended to do? Why?

This lesson is intended to challenge you to think. The result will be an understanding that produces a living faith.

2. What two (of many) complex studies/searches in scripture are mentioned in this lesson?

The two in this lesson are the Law and human redemption.

3. What is concept one presented in this lesson?

Concept one: The flaws were not in the Law, but in people.

4. What is concept two?

Concept two: God did for us what we could not do for ourselves. We were incapable of "perfect" human behavior. He forgave.

5. What is concept three?

Concept three: The solution to continuing Christian sinfulness was (is) perfect. Because God forgives, all He requires of Christians is honesty with self and Him about sinfulness.

6. What is the first thing called to your attention?

This text is not about perfect human behavior.

7. What is the second thing?

It is a serious matter to withhold fellowship from other Christians.

8. What is the third thing?

Twice John said God forgave all unrighteous/sinfulness if the Christian was penitent.

9. What is the fourth thing?

This is a workable solution to human sinfulness.

10. How does this lesson affirm God's caring for people?

The fact that God provided a continuing solution for a continuing human problem is evidence of the depth of God's caring for us.

Lesson Three

The Hatred of Brethren

Text: 1 John 2:1-11

The objective of this lesson: To emphasize that God's values have practical application (God's value of love expresses itself practically in the way Christians relate to brethren).

John began today's text making certain that his emphasis in 1:5-10 did not produce an undesired conclusion (remember that men added verses and chapters for human study convenience long after the text was written). The fact that God's forgiveness of humans defies human comprehension does not mean God's forgiveness is to be abused. God forgives, but God's forgiveness does not give anyone an excuse to keep on doing evil deliberately. John declared God's forgiveness gives us motivation to resist evil within ourselves rather than giving us an excuse to continue in evil (knowingly, willingly).

God's perfect solution for sin (forgiving the Christian of all sin if he/she is honest enough to acknowledge known errors) does not condone or encourage irresponsible conduct. As God makes us righteous, we are serious in our commitment to behave like righteous people. As we learn righteous conduct we seek to practice righteous conduct. We do NOT say, "I will continue to live as I please because God's grace will cover my sins."

God's solution for our sin problem includes providing the Christian with a righteous Advocate. Our Advocate constantly represents us before God the Father. Remember two things: (a) Sin is extremely offensive to God--it is the opposite of righteousness. Sin is not in God's being or character. (b) God the Father has never been flesh. Jesus understands what it means to be flesh and to be divine. We are represented before God by the only righteous one who knows through experience the difficulty of being human in an existence torn by the conflict between good and evil. Because Jesus Christ is righteous, he can appear before God. Because he has been human, he can perfectly represent our struggles.

Even in providing us the perfect solution to human sinfulness, God does not leave our righteousness up to us. Obedience is a response of appreciation to a patient God who generously forgives us. Yet, He recognizes Jesus Christ as our Advocate and propitiation. Without Jesus Christ functioning as Advocate and propitiation, we would be helpless.

Not only is Jesus our Advocate before God, but he is also the propitiation for our sins. He is the one who satisfied justice and provided God the right to forgive (see Romans 3:21-26). We can be forgiven because of Jesus' death. We can be favorably represented before God because of the righteous life Jesus lived.

Jesus' atonement/redemption for us in his death provided God, who is just by nature and character, the right to forgive without denying His nature and character.

What is the human response to the facts that Jesus can be our Advocate and propitiation? We respond by committing ourselves to keeping God's commandments. Here is one of the places we need to be extremely careful. If we Christians are not quite careful we reduce keeping the commandments to keeping the rules. Then the rules become a primary expression of our desires/expectations instead of God's values. If we do not exercise caution, if a person keeps our rules, he/she is "in," but if he/she does not he/she is "out." Too seldom are our rules focused on God's values. Too often, we emotionally react instead of studying the Word.

Our obedience to God is motivated by appreciation for what He did for us in Jesus' death and resurrection. We as Christians avoid the temptation to focus our obedience on rules we generate. Instead, we learn God's values and focus our obedience on His values. When we learn that one of "our rules" opposes "God's values," we willingly forsake "our rule."

To say that we as Christians have come to know God while we give no attention to accepting God's guidance by yielding to His teachings is to lie. Knowing God involves listening to God. To claim to know Him while refusing to listen to Him is to lie. To refuse to listen to Him means we do not know Him.

Seeking to lie to God severs our relationship with God. Belonging to God is more than verbal affirmation. That belonging is more than rule-keeping. It involves listening to become. We allow God to guide us to the life He wants us to live as the righteous person He wants us to be.

A keeping of His Word means learning to love as He loves. He both defines what it means to love and shows us how to love. (If we are a recipient of His forgiveness, we become an avenue of His forgiveness. Without love one cannot forgive.) Belonging to God means letting God teach us how to live and how to behave.

We learn to love. We do NOT learn from human behavior but from God's behavior. God teaches us what love is and how love behaves.

John's emphasis in verses 7-11 illustrate the emphasis on making certain that God's values are a central part of our expectations. We rarely think of the responsibility to love in the form of a command or a rule. We tend to think of commands or rules as being external regulators which govern the acts of an individual. We tend to consider love as an internal feeling or emotion. It is unpredictable, and it is not subject to rules, to regulations, or to commands.

Though Jesus said that the two greatest commands God gave Israel were founded on love, it is too convenient for people of today to separate love and commandment.

In today's typical thinking, how can a person be ordered to feel a particular way? Is not love beyond the scope of regulation? In our world, some of the most wicked acts are justified on the basis of love. Some of the most exploitive behaviors are defended in the

name of love. The thought that love can be restricted or focused in its behavior is a novel idea to many.

Love is commonly used today as a justification for godless conduct or actions. Everything from godless sexual gratification to murder is justified as an "act of love."

How could the responsibility to love be both an old and new commandment? God's expectations and intentions for Israel were that they exist as a people devoted to God's ownership (see Exodus 19:3-6). To these people God gave the responsibility to love rather than seeking vengeance (see Leviticus 19:18). Generations later, to the descendants of these people, Jesus said the two greatest commands God ever gave Israel were based on love--the first is to love God with all one's being; the second is to love your neighbor as yourself. Paul said later to Gentile Christians who were confused about their responsibility to the Jewish Law, "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Galatians 5:13, 14).

God always stressed the importance of love in human behavior. From the start, ability to have relationship with God was based on the ability to love others. Eve and Cain loved themselves in a self-love that gave little or no consideration to others.

The responsibility to show love if you belonged to God was an old emphasis.

However, the responsibility to love others reached new heights and concepts in Jesus Christ. The full light of God's intentions is made evident in Jesus' life and death. Those who are Jesus' disciples are committed to expressing love as Jesus expressed love. It is a new commandment because in Jesus love reached its fullest dimension. In this new expression it actually had (has) the power to destroy the darkness evil inflicts on people.

In Jesus' life on earth and death, God gave His fullest expression of love. Jesus revealed the meaning of love in ways it was never previously exemplified.

The primary expression of this responsibility to love is seen in loving those who love Jesus. Faith in Jesus, not culture or lineage, makes people brothers. Hatred of those who commit themselves to Jesus was not (is not) an option. Hatred of those who commit to Jesus was (is) certain evidence that the hater remains in darkness and does not know God.

The challenge of love for the Christian is to love others as does God. God loves without regard to culture or lineage. The fact that people are different does not affect God's love for them. Differences often affect our human ability to love. We want other people to be like us. The fact he or she is in Christ can be insignificant if he or she is "too different."

Loving people who significantly differ from us is and always has been a difficult challenge. The fact that those who are different commit to Jesus does not make the

challenge much easier. When we, as people committed to Jesus, exist in the same culture at the same place, it may not make it any easier. Racism, stereotyping, social divisions, clans, economic gaps, differing traditions, and arguments about the meaning or application of divine directives commonly remain even when people are committed to discipleship in Jesus.

It is much easier to be condescending to people who are different than it is to be respectful of people who are different. To be respectful, we need to appreciate their ability to survive in their circumstances.

The enormous commitment of God to us is reflected in the fact He loves all of us even when we struggle to love each other.

God's ability to love us in all our differences is astounding!

For Thought and Discussion

1. How did John wish to make certain his last paragraph in chapter 1 was not misunderstood?

He wanted his original readers to understand God's perfect solution to the human problem of sinfulness did not condone deliberate, irresponsible conduct.

2. In God's solution to our sin problem, what two roles does Jesus serve? Explain those roles.

Jesus is our Advocate as he represents us before God. He is our propitiation as he atones for or frees us from our sins.

3. How can Christians make themselves liars?
 - a. *By refusing to respect God's teachings by keeping His commandments.*
 - b. *By refusing to listen to God.*
4. Explain how the command to love is both an old and new commandment.

It is an old command because the importance of love always was stressed by God. It is new because it received its fullest expression in Jesus (in his life and death).

5. Discuss the practical aspects of loving those committed to Jesus who differ from us.

The discussion should include this: faith in Jesus Christ makes us members of God's family, not culture or lineage. It is difficult (challenging) to love those who are "too" different from us. It is much easier to react with racism, stereotyping, or social divisions than it is to respect in love.

Lesson Four

The Sense of Privilege

Text: 1 John 3:1-12

The objective of this lesson: To increase or stimulate the sense of privilege of being a part of God's family.

Why do some men and women devote a portion or all of their youth to military service of their country in times of crisis? Why will these men and women do so in the knowledge that such a commitment might cost them their lives? Why will some people attend college, acquire a specialty degree, begin a career, and then willingly (by choice) become a "stay-at-home" parent? Why will some people willingly (not of force or necessity) devote themselves to a cause? You likely could multiply examples of such types of commitment.

Ask your students for examples of people being motivated by a sense of privilege.

Those types of commitment occur for many reasons. High on the list of reasons, likely number one for some, is the sense of privilege. People will make sacrifices for "the sense of privilege" that they would never make for material considerations. The motivation for "privilege" exceeds any motivation for any material considerations.

Ask your students to contrast motivation that comes from a sense of privilege and motivation that comes from an aggressive pursuit of material ambitions.

Among Christians, in far too many considerations, we have lost our sense of privilege. Our Christian message has exchanged privilege for terror. In our desires (a) to convert people to Christ and (b) to motivate Christians to a greater involvement in service, we resort to terror rather than privilege. We try to scare people to heaven by terrorizing them with hell. We try to terrorize Christians to participate in projects "near and dear to our hearts" by implying their salvation is at risk if they do not get involved.

Discuss the fact that Christians as individuals and congregations have either never been exposed to the motivation of privilege or have lost a sense of privilege. Have them offer ideas of why this has happened.

It is easy for Christians to: (a) Do what they have always done in the congregation they grew up in, or (b) Do what seems to be necessary at the moment for achieving desired results. For both reasons, it is easy to substitute fear for the sense of privilege. Fifty years ago (or more), fear was a much better immediate motivater than it is today. Then it was much easier "to push a person's guilt button" and motivate people through a sense of guilt. Now people commonly resist feelings of guilt about anything. For example, then people felt guilty for having or acquiring. Now, even those who are extravagant feel no guilt for possessing.

Changing people in our society requires conversion. Attempts to find and pursue shortcuts to conversion produce spiritual disaster.

Christianity pays terrible prices because several generations have substituted terror for privilege.

Price # 1: We have made God an enemy who punishes instead of a caring being who is the source of merciful hope. This becomes abundantly obvious in a Christian's attitude when he/she approaches death. For many, meeting God is a dreadful, anxious moment, not a hope-filled moment.

Price # 2: Too many people substitute membership in a congregation to escape hell for conversion to Christ in appreciation for what God did/does. For many, Christianity is a matter of escaping rather than a matter of embracing. Too often, a person's motivation is more terror than it is appreciation.

Price # 3: We do too little to emphasize that salvation is a matter of grace, not accomplishments. The result: Christians live in little hope. While we say we cannot earn salvation, we act as though we can. The point of being in Christ is to move us from hopelessness to a life filled with hope expressed in healthy expectation.

Price # 4: We find terror steadily decreasing in effectiveness as a method of motivating people. Terror has a "shelf life." People eventually get tired of living a terror-filled life and rebel against the terror lifestyle. That weariness comes even more rapidly if no immediate consequences are endured for rebellion. If one serves God only because of terror, he/she has no reason to continue service when he/she is no longer in terror.

Challenge your students to think rather than react; to understand rather than assume. A general example: in certain circumstances or situations a well-meaning person had a "good idea" to meet an immediate need he/she saw. The "good idea" was successful and effective. Add some time, and the "good idea" became theological perspective. The theological perspective increased in popular acceptance. It became accepted thinking and procedure to the degree it made the transition from a theological perspective to "the correct way" to approach the original need or problem. Since no one could possibly disagree with the established "correct way" of doing things, the problems produced by the "good idea" could not possibly be the result of anything associated with the original "good idea."

Using the concept of being evangelistic in the paragraph above, long ago someone decided that the goals of evangelism could be achieved more readily if people were terrified into being evangelistic. With time, terror responses became the core of evangelism's theology. More time and terror responses become the "correct way" to approach evangelism. Since terror is the accepted "correct way" to do evangelism, who dares suggest conversion involves a sense of privilege instead of a sense of terror?

Consider: For years, the American Christian has regarded the American church as the source of material support for world evangelism. What happens when material need exceeds the American church's ability to respond? Does God's world evangelism collapse? (This is not even a suggestion that Christians should fail to be generous or moved by the needs of others. It is the challenge NOT to measure spiritual success in terms of material planning or to evaluate evangelistic success on the basis of material criteria.)

While John was filled with objections to living a lifestyle of sin, he is also first filled with a sense of privilege. Remember who John is! He was one of the first who followed Jesus (Matthew 4:18-22), and one of the "inner three" of the twelve (Matthew 17:1-3). This man actually followed, heard, and saw Jesus as he listened to Jesus teach and saw him perform miracles. He had his view of God transformed by Jesus. He grasped (on earth) the majesty and perfection of God in a way we, as humans on earth, are unlikely to ever grasp.

Seek to make John come to life as a person to capture his sense of awe generated by God making it possible for humans to be in His family.

To John, it was astounding that God the Father would invite humans to be a part of His family with the status of children. To him, it would have been a privilege to be slaves in God's household, or servants to Him--but children??? Unthinkable!

Since humans are the hosts of sin and God has no sin in Him, the fact that God could welcome the hosts of sin into His family is astounding. As John verified in 1 John 1:5-10 the reality of sin in human life does not stop at baptism. If forgiveness is not ongoing, the human situation is hopeless. The understanding that God would allow that which makes Him sick (sin) [see Revelation 3:15, 16] to be present in His family members defies John's comprehension.

Since we live in a society that does not have slaves or servants as they did, since we live in a society that is unlikely to see the privileges of elite families regularly, it is difficult for us to "see" what John "saw" that filled him with amazement. He wanted his original readers to know two things. The first: Christians are God's children in God's family. The second: one of the benefits of being in God's family is the assurance that when Jesus appears, we shall be like him.

The realities of our social situation and the realities of John's society are not the same.

Every Christian is a part of God's family. Every Christian will have the form of the eternal Jesus when the resurrected Jesus returns. See I Corinthians 15:35-44 to note there is a spiritual body.

Characteristic of John's writing, he also stressed responsibility. With privilege comes responsibility. The responsibility: An awareness of the privilege of being in God's family immediately produces a commitment to God's concept of purity. (This concept

understands that sin is the opposite of what God is and causes God revulsion. No child in a healthy relationship with his/her father wants to cause his/her father to be offended by his/her presence. For the Christian, respectful behavior involves a commitment to purity.)

The privilege of forgiveness does not excuse irresponsible behavior.

In the rest of John's thought in this paragraph, he emphasized: (a) That a sin lifestyle has no place in God's family. (b) One cannot live a righteous lifestyle without devotion to righteous behavior. (c) Hatred for a member of God's family is the ultimate expression of a sin lifestyle.

This is intended as a summary focus of the rest of John's points in the paragraph. Please expand the emphasis as you wish and time permits.

John walked the tight rope that all teachers of scripture walk. He wanted his original readers to understand the incredible adequacy of God's forgiveness. Thus, he stressed God's perfect solution to human sinfulness (1 John 1:5-10); our Advocate and propitiation (1 John 2:1,2); forgiveness in Jesus Christ (1 John 2:12); and the privilege of being in Jesus Christ (1 John 3:1-3). At the same time, he stressed that God's marvelous forgiveness does not give the Christian the right to rebel against God by deliberate sin (1 John 2:1; 1 John 2:15-17; 1 John 3:4ff).

It is a challenge to every student of scripture to draw the line correctly between God's incredible forgiveness and rebellion against God's values. That line runs between God's forgiveness and the responsible behavior of the obedient person in Christ. The challenge is to understand God's balance.

The objective of accepting God's incredible forgiveness and the adequacy of Jesus Christ is to embrace God's purity. The Christian escapes sin in Jesus Christ. He/she does not run to sin or justify sinful lifestyles. It is the responsible acceptance of a gift. We become righteous in Jesus Christ to commit ourselves to a righteous lifestyle. Those who have found life in Jesus Christ through the patient God's mercy want nothing to do with sin!

The objective of the person in Christ is to pursue purity based on God's standards. The Christian does not justify sin, but seeks to run from sin. Consider the impact of God on a person's life by considering Joseph's reaction to Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39:7-18. We are not forgiven of sin in order to justify our sinfulness.

Our importance to God is seen in His extending us the privilege of being members of His family.

God endures a lot to allow us to be children in His family!

For Thought and Discussion

1. What type of commitment is discussed in this lesson?

Commitment motivated by a sense of privilege.

2. What have we too often exchanged? Why?

We too often have exchanged privilege for terror. This is done in a desire (a) to convert people or (b) to motivate Christians.

3. What are four terrible prices we now pay because of that exchange?

- a. *We have made God our enemy.*
- b. *We substitute membership in a congregation for conversion to Christ.*
- c. *We do not emphasize the necessity of grace.*
- d. *We make Christianity hopeless instead of hope filled.*

4. Who was John? What did he grasp?

He was a follower of Jesus, one of the inner three, a witness of Jesus' miracles, a hearer of Jesus as he taught. He grasped God's majesty and perfection.

5. Why is it difficult for us to "see" what John "saw"?

It is difficult for us to grasp what John grasped because our society is different from John's society.

6. What else did John emphasize?

He also stressed responsibility.

7. What three additional things did John stress in our text?

- a. *He emphasized a sin lifestyle has no place in God's family.*
- b. *Being righteous involves a commitment to righteous behavior.*
- c. *Hatred for a member of God's family is the ultimate expression of a sin lifestyle.*

8. What tightrope did John walk?

He walked the tightrope between God's incredible forgiveness and rebellious sin.

Lesson Five

The Power of Love for Christians

Text: 1 John 3:13-24

The objective of this lesson: To stress the importance of Christians loving Christians.

People are hard to love. They always have been. Typically, a person likes other people "who are like me, follow my focus, and allow me to be in control of their thoughts and concepts." In most cases, congregations in whom the Spirit of God obviously controls are congregations of members who respect each other when in disagreement. Maintaining "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Paul--Ephesians 4:3) is a matter of mutual respect, not rules-keeping. There is no peace of God in the person who demands respect but does not show respect. Typically, we do not love those we do not respect.

Stress the importance of Christians having respect for other Christians. Stress the fact that without respect, love or peace cannot exist.

As we consider John's enormous emphasis on loving the brethren, consider these examples.

(1) Consider God's example. Most of us agree that if we love Jesus Christ enough to commit, God loves us enough to make us part of His family. Think only of those in Christ. Begin with two realizations: (a) None of us are perfect. (b) God sees and knows each imperfection. God's love for us is not based on our being correct in all matters. [In fact, in matters of "correctness" God's priorities and our priorities are often distinctly different. For example, "how" communion is served in a Sunday assembly could quickly cause discord in many congregations. There are no New Testament instructions on "how" to serve communion. Is God's priority our "how" or Jesus' "in remembrance of me"?] Yet, in spite of the fact that (a) no one in Christ is perfect, and (b) no one duplicates God's priorities, God loves us. God's love for the Christian is not based on him or her being precisely right, but on His forgiveness and our love of His son. Then how can our love for each other be based on our perceived "correctness"?

God is our ultimate example in (a) showing how to love and (b) being motivated by love. Stress God's love is (thankfully!) not dependent on our perfection. While Christians constantly seek to better understand God's ways and priorities, perfection is never an achievement but always a goal. God's love for us is based on our commitment and His forgiveness--not the impossible objective of our perfection. The fact that God's love is not based on our perfection should help us understand that our love for other Christians is not based on their perfection.

(2) The first complete example of hatred's destructiveness in hatred's selfishness is Cain and Abel (Genesis 4, referenced in 1 John 3:11, 12). John's message in the

incident is that people of God should "love one another." The reason John gave for Cain slaying his brother: "His deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous." The point in today's text: hatred of a brother alienates from God. No one is led by obeying God to hatred of others. Quite the opposite--obedience to God results in the love of people, and especially people in Christ.

Cain's selfishness encouraged and enhanced Cain's hatred. The combination of Cain's selfishness and hatred resulted in Cain murdering his own brother. To suggest that Cain represented God or God's purposes is ridiculous! Those who allow their hatred to make them murderers do not represent the God of loving compassion. In the same way, those who replace compassionate love for brethren in Christ with hatred for brethren in Christ are murderers who cannot represent God any more than Cain did. Representing the God of righteousness in this world through righteous behavior is one of the goals of those who accept Jesus Christ.

(3) The "world" are those people who cling to the ability to hate people. An evidence that the Christian transitions from death to life is his or her ability to love those in Christ. An evidence that the person remains a part of the "world" (the people who reject God's work in Christ) is hate. The Christian does not evidence his or her love "in theory," but in "action." He or she will forfeit life for a fellow believer. He or she will respond to a believer's needs. His or her love for those in Christ will express itself. It will be more than an internal conviction.

To hate is to live in the darkness of evil. To love is to exist in God's enlightenment. To commit to love through being touched with divine love is much more than a mental agreement. Such love must express itself in ways that are consistent with having that love. Just as God's love was (is) focused on us, we also focus our love of God on people. We as Christians especially focus our love for God on people who, like us, love God. Just as God's love for us was (is) beyond boundaries, our love for those in Christ defies boundaries. We make great, continual sacrifices for others in Christ. We evidence we walk in God's light and reject darkness by the way we treat others in Christ.

Perhaps a common mistake is this: "It was easy then, but hard now." It always has been hard! This commitment rarely if ever has been mastered by people. This is one of the commitments that resulted in Jesus' crucifixion! There always has been divisions in social classes, in racial considerations, in economic levels, and in political orientations. There always has been a huge gulf between "the haves" and "the have nots" regardless of the area considered. In most instances, those problems were even more complex and larger in the first century than they are now.

There was a time decades ago when Christians were a struggling minority. Most of them were poor or lower middle class people often living in a rural setting, often struggling to meet personal or family needs. The past few decades have brought enormous changes. The education level in the church rose significantly. The prosperity level in the church rose significantly. Now, in many instances, we are a prosperous,

urban-based church with members who have personal ambitions that would not be understood by Christians of past generations. Now, our struggles are against materialism, not against poverty. Now instead of being the poor, we struggle to understand the poor.

John's point is simple, but his concept is complex. It is easy to say, "Christians should love," but it is challenging to express love. It is hard to love those who (a) do not love us back, and (b) seek to exploit our love. No where is that more true than in a congregation.

Love is easy to declare with words, but hard to practice with actions. If today's congregation is successful in its outreach, it becomes increasingly diverse. It is in diversity that Christians find and experience their most demanding love challenges.

One of the striking appeals of Christians among non-Christians is found in the Christian's ability to love people that do not like him or her. One of the striking differences between the younger Christians of today and the older Christians of today is found in the desire to express love to our world. There is an enormous need for younger Christians to understand that older Christians often sacrificed to enable congregations to exist. Many older Christians lived through times that were not prosperous, but they gave, labored, and endured. There equally is an enormous need for older Christians to understand that younger Christians must also make sacrifices. Whereas older Christians often sacrificed for existence, younger Christians sacrifice by reaching out to the unbelieving world by addressing people issues.

The poor value daily relationships in ways that middle-class people do not consider. Since love is relationship based, it has an appeal to many people who are economically challenged. It is commonly the basis of effective outreach.

The concept of sacrifice in older Christians is commonly quite different from the concept of sacrifice in younger Christians. In older Christians, the concept is often thing or money centered. In younger Christians it often is "what can I do" or "what can I give of myself" centered. Often older Christians might say or think, "Why would you do that?" not because they have no faith or no sense of sacrifice, but because their concepts are different. There is an urgent need for older and younger Christians to communicate the meaning of their concepts to each other without judging each other.

The church yet again faces an enormous transition. In my lifetime, I have seen a few believers with no facilities, then more believers with meager facilities poorly situated, then even more believers with competitive facilities, then many believers with what (in the past) are unthinkable facilities. I watched us go from no programs [of necessity] to elaborate programs. At some point, we must realize that the facilities and programs that would have worked marvelously years ago are not today's solution. At some point, we must realize that it is not a matter of what we have but what we are. What were the past's "survival issues" easily can become the present's "selfishness issues."

Both economics and opportunity have radically changed in the past several decades. Those changes constantly call for meaningful transition. The objective is not to change God's message in Jesus Christ, but to help people see how God in Jesus Christ addresses their needs.

The objective of God's church (a) is **not** to create an "ancient moat, huge defensive walls, and a draw bridge" to remove the church safely from the world "out there." (b) Instead, the objective of God's church is to invade the world with the weapon of love and share the fact that the world also has a Savior in Jesus Christ. The transition is from a survival mentality to an outreach of love mentality. If we do not make this transition, the alternative (in time) is extinction as a religious group. Those of us who are older are dying, and our children do not value our battle lines.

People who exist in darkness often cause people who live in God's light to be fearful because Christians do not understand people who live in darkness. Since most of the conversions of the last two decades (in many congregations) came from the children of members, the typical Christian has little meaningful association with people who know little about God. In fear, many Christians become more concerned with "protecting and preserving the congregation" than bringing people they do not understand to Christ (not realizing that preserving the congregation is directly linked to bringing people to Christ). Spiritual survival in congregations depends on showing people how Jesus Christ meets our needs.

One of the huge problems John addressed was a growing Christless Christianity. Today, we need a deep understanding of how dependent we are on Jesus Christ. We must make him the focus of what we do!

John's concern that a Christless Christianity is developing is reflected in such passages as 1 John 2:22; 3:23; 4:3; 4:15; 5:1, 5, 11, 12; and 2 John 7, 9. We can develop a Christless Christianity by emphasizing forms not mentioned in scripture, by focusing on traditions as an evidence of faithfulness, or by stressing procedures to the exclusion of motives. That which emphasizes human accomplishments over God's accomplishments in Jesus' death and resurrection is Christless.

Christians express their appreciation to God by showing their world the power of sacrificial love. The source of such love is God Himself. God's expression of such love is Jesus' death.

I demonstrate my love for God by loving those God loves. All I can do for God is show appreciation for what He has done and does for me. I can use the love I learned from God to help the people God loves.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Discuss the fact that people are "hard to love."

Include in the discussion the challenge of loving people who act in unlovable ways.

2. Discuss the fact that God loves us.

Include in the discussion the fact that God loves us in our imperfections in the full knowledge of our flaws.

3. What is our first complete example for hatred? Why did Cain hate Abel?

The first complete example is the interaction between Cain and Abel. Cain hated Abel because Cain's actions were evil, and Abel's were righteous.

4. In our text, in John's emphasis, who are the "world"?

The "world" are the people who cling to the ability to hate people.

5. What striking appeal do Christians have among non-Christians ?

They (in God) cultivate the ability to love people who do not love them.

6. What enormous transition does the church face?

The church faces the transition from a survival mentality to an outreach of love mentality.

7. Discuss what **IS** and **IS NOT** the objective of God's church.

The objective is to invade the world with the weapon of love to share the fact that the world has a Savior. The objective is not to remove the church from having contact with and influence in the world.

Lesson Six

Godliness: A Matter of Godly Character

Text: 1 John 4:7-21

The objective of this lesson: To stress the importance of allowing God to teach us how to love each other and the importance of our placing our faith in Jesus Christ.

The time for today's lesson could easily be spent on the process of translation, on the uniqueness of Jesus as the Christ, and on religious technicalities. These things would mean little to most of us as we seek to be God's people. Rather than focus on those things, this study seeks to challenge students to an awareness of what it means to belong to God.

The matters of when and why "only begotten son" was used to translate 1 John 4:9, why Jesus was unique, why use "begotten" since God is neither human nor sexual, the rise and emphasis of gnosticism, etc. could consume the lesson and the time allotted for the class. While such a focus has merit in a scholarly study, most Christians could listen to such discussions and not be edified. The focus of these remarks hopefully (a) is rooted in the text and (b) causes Christians to reflect on the essential nature of love, and (c) the importance of placing our trust in Jesus Christ.

At times, Christians become so consumed with technical understanding (a) that faith in the Christ and (b) reflecting God's character in our lives become irrelevant religious considerations. Where we "stand" regarding an "issue" and how "knowledgeable" we are in our "issue position" becomes more important than faith in God's Christ or reflecting God's character in our lives.

Today it seems too common for Christians to exchange their "stance on humanly produced or emphasized issues" for faith in Jesus Christ.

The two ongoing challenges that face the man or woman in God daily are (a) loving people and (b) maintaining confidence in God's great love for us.

The issues that face most Christians daily do not focus on technicalities but on "How do I live and act in this situation?"

As a Christian, how do I relate to an imperfect spouse? How do I react to children who disappoint or hurt me? How should I let injustices in the unbelieving world impact the person I am? How should I let imperfections in the church affect me? How am I to react to a brother or sister that feels justified in hurting me? How do I relate to brothers or sisters who are very much unlike me?

How do I show love in this situation when a person is not behaving in a lovable manner?

If I am to believe God forgives me, why do I continue to feel so guilty? If God pardoned me, why do I feel so condemned? If Jesus is my redemption, why do I feel so far from God? If Jesus' resurrection is my hope, why does everyday life tear me apart with endless faith challenges and stomp a broken me with never-ending temptations?

How do I show faith in Jesus Christ when I really struggle with my own humanity?

John wrote to Christians who struggled with people among them who claimed great godliness (a) while substituting "special knowledge" for faith and (b) rejecting those who rejected their "special knowledge." These were people who said, "Being saved is merely a matter of having special knowledge, and we have that knowledge--so listen to us.

It is quite important for us to realize that (a) John wrote to Christians who were struggling and (b) focused on things they struggled with on a regular basis.

In today's text, notice the obvious. First, God is not displayed; He is evidenced. No one sees Him. People can see the evidence of Him in the way we love. Knowledge of God is evidenced in becoming a person of love because love is an important part of God's character. The Spirit of God in a person results in the person becoming more loving.

It is easy not to see the obvious.

Christians need to understand God is evidenced, not seen. God is evidenced in the way the values which shape His character transform our lives. Nothing changes us to the obvious degree as does the way His love changes the way we love. His love was (is) expressed in kindness shown to the unlovable. His love is not about selfish pleasure, but about unselfish kindness. Those touched by Him show His love to His children--much easier said than done!

God defines what it means to love. Christians learn the true meaning of love from God and His actions. In love, God sent Jesus to be a propitiation/expiation for our sins (the gracious replacement for our sins). God did not do this because we are lovable and inoffensive. God did this in spite of the fact that people are unlovable and offensive. God loved us with a love that (a) ignored treating us with the justice we deserved and (b) treated us with grace which we did not deserve.

God's love involves a concept that is not common in our society. In many relationships what people call love has more to do with self-gratification than a commitment to kindness. To grasp God's definition of love it is essential to change concepts of love. God must both reveal the concept as well as give the definition.

By His actions in Jesus, God introduces us to a love that exists, not because of the desirability of the loved, but because of the nature of the one who loves. That is most unnatural in this world and its relationships!

Illustrate God's love by noting Romans 5:6-8. God paid the full price of human redemption with no assurance that human free will beings would respond to His sacrifice. Christ died for sinful people, not good (in the sense of godly) people.

Those who are in Christ are dedicated to this kind of love. This kind of love refuses to hate another person in Christ!

This is the concept of love that fuels the commitment of the Christian who belongs to God. In showing kindness to the unlovable, God does not ask us to do something He has not done.

No one sees God! They only see God in the person who belongs to God. They see God in the person because they see God's love in the person. The kind of love that moved God to send Jesus to remove our sins is the kind of love that motivates Christians to love each other and to be kind to those who do not believe.

We will not and cannot show people God. We can and should show people the evidence of God. We as Christians show the evidence of God by being a living demonstration of the impact of God on our lives. It is the obvious change in the values we live for that evidences God's impact on our lives. His values become our concepts.

Second, Christians were not ashamed to acknowledge that Jesus is God's son. When John wrote, it could be quite dangerous to affirm faith in Jesus as God's son. The circumstances were not at all like the circumstances in a democracy where it should be safe to affirm faith in Jesus. In John's age, to affirm faith in Jesus as a world Savior often produced disastrous consequences.

From the beginning of Christianity, commitment to Jesus Christ was not a matter of convenience. Instead of being a matter of convenience, it was a matter of destination-- not in physical life, but after physical death. Often it was a sacrificial, costly commitment.

Affirming faith in Jesus as Savior was not a matter of convenience but a matter of appreciation. God did the inconvenient in sending and sacrificing Jesus. They were willing to do the inconvenient in acknowledging what God did in Jesus.

Only those with appreciation for what God did for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus will make this commitment. It will always be a faith commitment.

We are not talking about intentionally producing unnecessary resentment. We are talking about not being ashamed. It is the contrast between provoking resentment through obnoxious behavior and expressing appreciation for someone who has blessed and delivered us.

Christians do not provoke unnecessary resentment. Resentment occurs when people reject who we are and how we live. Resentment occurs, not because we are obnoxious,

but because our values are not the values of those around us. Ironically, the same values that cause some to resent us also cause others to be converted to Jesus Christ.

God's love for us was a matter of character. Our love for God's work through Jesus is a matter of character. It is because of who God made us to be in Jesus that we are who we are and act as we act. A Christian's love is not centered in his or her pleasure, but in the other person's need.

We must not condense response to Jesus Christ to rituals, steps, or procedures. The core of this faith commitment is found in who we are because of our relationship with God through Jesus. It will always be a matter of Christian character based on God's values and principles. Our responses are never based on other's actions, but on God's actions toward us.

God's great concern for us is seen in His love that sent us Jesus!

We always measure God's kindness in His gift of Jesus. We never determine our response by considering the bad behavior or hateful deeds of others.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What is the focus of today's lesson?

The focus is on the meaning of belonging to God.

2. What can happen when a Christian becomes consumed with a technical focus in spiritual considerations?
 - a. *Faith in God*
 - b. *reflecting God's character in our lives becomes irrelevant.*
3. What focus can easily replace a focus on Jesus Christ?

Where we "stand" on an "issue and how "knowledgeable" we are in our "stand" becomes more important than a focus on Jesus Christ.

4. What two challenges face the Christian on a daily basis?

The two great challenges are loving people and maintaining confidence in God's great love for us.

5. John wrote to Christians who struggled with what?

They struggled with people who claimed great godliness (a) while they substituted "special knowledge" for faith in Jesus Christ and (b) rejected those who rejected their "special knowledge."

6. Discuss this statement: "God is not displayed; He is evidenced."

The discussion should include these facts: God cannot be seen, but He can be evidenced in the impact His love has on our lives.

7. Who defines what it means to love?

God defines what it means to love.

8. How did God introduce us to His definition of love?

He sent Jesus to die for our sins and make relationship with Him possible.

9. God's kind of love refuses to do what?

His kind of love exists, not because of the desirability of the loved, but because of the nature of the one who is loved.

10. Who sees God?

No one sees God.

11. What are Christians not ashamed to acknowledge?

They are not ashamed to acknowledge that Jesus is God's son.

12. God's love for us was a matter of character; thus our love for each other and God is a matter of character.

Lesson Seven

Obedience and Love Do Not Exclude Each Other

Text: 1 John 5:1-12

The objective of this lesson: To stress the meaning of committing to Jesus Christ.

The question everyone asks and answers either consciously or subconsciously is this: "What is the purpose of my life?" Is it to marry and have children? Or to obtain power? Or to devote myself to education? Or to acquire money? Or to obtain possessions? Or to seek personal pleasure? Or to develop status/influence? Or to endure my situation? Or to change my circumstances? Or to provide my children opportunities I never had?

Everyone decides how he or she will use his or her life. The decision made is reflected in the considerations favored by the choices the person makes.

This same writer wrote in his gospel a statement from Jesus: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The context of this statement is that of a shepherd and his sheep. Jesus drew a distinct contrast between himself and others who claimed to be God's Messiah in this way: "The others only care about what is best for them; I care about what is best for my sheep. In me, those who follow have life, and they have it to the fullest." Often, when sheep followed the best shepherd, it was necessary for the shepherd to lead the sheep through some of the wilderness' most desolate places to reach lush grazing and still pools. In those times, the sheep must never lose confidence that their shepherd has their best interests at heart.

This fact is beyond overemphasis: As Christians, we must have complete confidence that our Savior (Jesus Christ) is always focused on our eternal best interest. Even in difficult times, the Christian refuses to doubt Jesus' commitment to him or her. The unselfishness of Jesus is central to Christians maintaining constant confidence in Jesus as they endure stressful times and situations.

The context of John's writing (1 John) should be significant to us. Seemly, there were those who affirmed that one had only to love God to belong to God (believing in Jesus Christ was unnecessary), and those who affirmed obedience had nothing to do with belonging to God. Thus, some said that following God had nothing to do with placing confidence in Jesus Christ (you could love God without committing to Jesus Christ). Others said belonging to God had nothing to do with obedience (as long as you acknowledged Him, you did not have to obey Him). There are still those who wish to reduce Christianity to a feeling or an acknowledgment. There are still people who prefer to see Christianity as a convenience rather than a commitment.

The situation John's original readers faced makes John's writing more meaningful to us in our situations. It helps to know he wrote to real people with actual discouragements.

The text of the lesson began by emphasizing two basic facts about spiritual birth: (a) when spiritual birth takes place, the person believes Jesus is the Christ, and (b) when spiritual birth takes place, the one born to God loves others who are also born to God. John did not write "all inclusively" in 1 John, but he addressed the problems confronting the original recipients of his letter. For examples, Jesus spoke of the futility of those who only cried, "Lord, Lord" (Matthew 7:22) and of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27). No one was more meticulous and technically precise in their obedience than were the Pharisees--even when they did wrong things, they had to do them in "the right way."

We often stress "how" a person is born in a new birth, in God's family, in Christ. We too seldom stress "what it means" to yield to the new birth, to be in God's family, to be in Christ. When we place much stress on "how" and little stress on "what it means," it is easy for people to make baptism an impersonal act instead of a personal commitment. When that happens, what is called Christianity becomes an inexpressive Christless religion instead of a following of the Savior.

John stressed two examples. (a) If you love the parent, you love the child of the parent. Thus, if you love God, you love the person born into God's family. (b) Loving God and practicing God's teachings will result in loving people who belong to God. Nothing about loving and obeying God will result in rejecting those who love and obey God.

In John's examples, the first was likely a commonly understood truth acknowledged by most everyone. The second was a truth each Christian needed to understand.

Regarding the first, it is still true that people generally are quite protective of their children. A person's actions toward a child will affect his or her relationship with the parent.

Regarding the second, Christians need to understand that God's influence does not make us hostile toward other Christians. The common denominator spiritually is not a common culture; it is a common God who sent us a common Savior.

Obeying God is not humanly impossible. Jesus said (in comparison to first century Jewish traditions, regulations, and requirements) "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Christian opposition came from "the world." "The world" is the last domain of Satan. John spoke of those who committed to Satan's leadership in rejection of God and Jesus Christ as "the world." Those in Christ were assured of personal victory over the anti-God forces that confronted them. The force that overcame the anti-God forces they confronted was faith in Jesus Christ, not power as pursued by the anti-God forces.

Obedience to God is not humanly impossible (consider 1 John 1:5-10). In God's grace and mercy expressed in Jesus Christ (John 1:17), obedience becomes "user friendly."

Our struggle is not with our ability to obey God, but with our desires to be like godless people.

God's forgiveness, even in the Old Testament, involved a cleansing (read Leviticus 16). Cleansing commonly involved water and blood--often a washing and sacrificial blood. In John's emphasis, a cleansing was also involved. There was water involved and the sacrificial blood of Jesus.

If you have a problem with the fact that God forgave before Jesus died, consider 1 Kings 11:7-14 and especially note verse 13; Psalm 51; Romans 3:21-26 and especially note verse 25. Also consider Acts 17:30. (For additional examples, consider Leviticus 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; Numbers 14:19; 15:25, 26; 1 Kings 8:30, 34, 36, 39, 50; 2 Chronicles 7:11-14; Jeremiah 36:3.) The issue is not who did God forgive or when did God forgive. The issue is what must I do to have access to what God did for me in Christ.

What were the witnesses of this cleansing? First, the witnesses were from God, not from humans. The witnesses of the Christian cleansing included the ancient elements of cleansing--water and sacrificial blood. Additionally, the witnesses also included God's Spirit.

In the past, the witnesses came from the rituals. Now, the witnesses come from what God did in Jesus Christ.

God declared Jesus to be His son (John 1:29-34; Matthew 3:13-17). His son was (is) adequate for human cleansing--Jesus' death is the source of water and blood (John 19:34). Faith in God's son is faith in what God did in Jesus to cleanse us. To the person who trusts what God did in Jesus, the reward is life.

There is no human need for forgiveness that cannot be resolved when a penitent person brings the sin to Jesus Christ.

Possessing the life that God gave involves having Jesus (being in Christ). Apart from Jesus, there is no life. The eternal life God promised in His son does not exist without faith in God's son as the gift the Lord God gave humanity, as God's promised Messiah or Christ.

God's enormous concern for humanity is seen in what God did for us in Christ. Read Romans 5:8 and marvel at God's merciful concern.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What question does every person ask consciously or subconsciously?

What is the purpose of my life?

2. What statement from Jesus did John's gospel record?

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." John 10:10

3. In the context of 1 John, what two attitudes did his readers often encounter?
 - a. *One can love God and not believe in Jesus Christ.*
 - b. *One can belong to God without obeying God.*
4. What two facts did John note about spiritual birth?
 - a. *For spiritual birth to take place, one must believe in Jesus Christ.*
 - b. *For spiritual birth to take place, the one born to God loves others who are born to God.*
5. Give examples of the inadequacy of a faith that does not express itself in obedience.

The examples include the cry of "Lord, Lord" in Matthew 7:22; the builders in Matthew 7:24-27; and the Pharisees.

6. What did John say about love for a parent?

If you love the parent, you love the parent's child.

7. What did John say loving God and practicing His teachings would produce?

Loving God and practicing His teachings will result in loving people who belong to God.

8. Is obeying God humanly impossible? Explain your answer.

No. Jesus makes obedience possible.

9. In 1 John, who are "the world"?

Those who commit themselves to Satan's leadership and reject God and Jesus Christ are "the world".

10. What did God's forgiveness always involve?

God's forgiveness always involved a cleansing.

11. What were the witnesses of the Christian cleansing?

The witnesses are the water, the blood, and God's Spirit.

Lesson Eight

Be Careful of Who You Let Influence You

Text: 2 John

The purpose of this lesson: To stress the importance of understanding God's purpose to enable us to have a better understanding of God's character.

Begin by noting a common problem. Humans (certainly including Christians!) tend to weave their immediate concerns into the fabric of their religious faith. As an example, consider Henry Kissinger. He was the 56th Secretary of State from 1973 to 1977. He was also Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs from 1969 to 1975. At the height of his public political career, he was an accomplished, well known man worldwide. On a continent (other than the Americas) in a country much removed from the USA, many citizens in that nation regarded him to be the beast in Revelation. Though he was just a man, he became a religious symbol considered a threat to that nation. As a second example, incorporated among the concerns of radical Muslims is the conviction that Western culture is a threat to their faith system.

It is amazing how often we force what God said or what scripture said to fit our concerns or desires. Such is easy to see in others but hard to see in ourselves.

Before we as Christians quickly "finger point" at the convictions of nonchristian perspectives, note how often we individualize our religious convictions. There are few things that we do not justify or rationalize on a religious basis. We either keep our mouths shut about our real reasons, or we say, "Don't you know?" as we cite what we think is a biblical justification.

Before we find fault with others, we need to honestly examine ourselves. People will listen and learn from us only when we are honest about our own flaws. We cannot always be right, but we can always be honest.

The power of religious influence in a religious human's existence commonly is powerful beyond imagination. Likely all of us have behavior-altering or behavior-shaping beliefs whose only justification for existing is "that is (was) what my parents believed and taught me." Such is likely true of our parents also. Their parents influenced them, they influenced us, and we influence our children.

We need to be honest with God and His Word if we are to see what He says instead of what we want Him to say.

In the short, one chapter book of 2 John, John stressed these things: (a) Love each other. (b) Keep God's commandments--of which loving each other is one. (c) Beware of the deceivers. The deceivers do not believe that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. Do not let the deceivers destroy your reward. (d) Abide in [continue your existence in] the

teachings of Jesus Christ. That is the key to having a relationship with God. Be extremely cautious about being influenced by those who would destroy your faith in Jesus Christ. (e) I [the writer] will give you additional instructions when I see you.

Two of John's emphases stand out in this short letter. (a) Christian commitment led Christians to love Christians. Commitment to relationship with God through Christ was more significant than other relationships. (b) There were those who were dedicated to deception. A denial of Jesus as being God's promised Christ was a key part of their deception.

Please note: the source of the commandments they should follow [which will direct them to truth] is God the Father (verse 4). God the Father will use the teachings of Jesus Christ to guide them to truth and Himself. They are to understand that the ultimate source of spiritual truth is God the Father.

God is the source of truth about relationship with Him. He communicates His values through Jesus Christ's teachings.

To me, these truths are self-evident in 2 John's message: (a) The Christian never stops growing, never stops understanding. (b) He or she will rely on the teachings of Jesus Christ to lead him or her to God (sound like John 14:6, 7?). (c) The Christian will be extremely cautious about what he or she allows to influence him or her. (d) He or she knows there are people who want to deceive him or her. These people deny the significance of Jesus Christ and his relationship with God.

Holding on to what they learned in Jesus Christ could be as demanding as the learning that turned them from idolatry to Jesus Christ. It is demanding to hang on to what you have learned in Jesus Christ when you face severe temptation.

Put on your thinking caps. God has a purpose in Jesus Christ that He has in no one or nothing else. God said to Abraham before Israel existed, 2000 years before the birth of Jesus, "And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). God also said to Abraham, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Genesis 22:18). And again in Genesis 26:4 "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed ..." And yet again, "Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 28:14).

To see God as an aimless being or to see God as One who changes purposes easily is to misunderstand God. God had a particular relationship He wanted with humans from creation. At no time in all the ages did that desire change. It still has not changed. God made it evident in His promises to Abraham that He pursued His desire with purpose. That desire could not be satisfied with one nation. God wanted that relationship with all families of the earth.

Luke (Acts 3:25, 26) and Paul (Galatians 3:1-14) declared God spoke of Jesus when he said Abraham's descendants would bring a blessing to the world.

God's desire/purpose could be and would be satisfied in Jesus the Christ.

The ultimate purpose of God for the Jewish nation and their temple was to lead all nations to God. When Solomon dedicated the first temple, he prayed, "Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Your name's sake (for they will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name, to fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by Your name" (I Kings 8:41-43). Isaiah wrote, "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations ..." (Isaiah 42:6) Again Isaiah wrote, "He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant, To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations, So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth'" (Isaiah 49:6).

God's desire was to use the nation of Israel as His means to His purpose. He wanted to work in Israel in such a manner that He would not only bring the Christ, but that they also would help Him reach the world. The problem occurred because Israel concluded that they were God's objective, not just God's means to His purpose. We, as Christians, can too easily make the same mistake. God wanted them to illustrate His greatness.

God had a purpose when He made promises to Abraham. He pursued the same purpose in Israel. He pursues the same purpose in Jesus Christ, and in us. God's purpose has not changed Even Jesus as he faced death on the night of his betrayal understood God has a purpose. In Jesus' immediate purpose, he did not wish to die or assume the huge responsibility attached to his death. Yet, he understood that God's purpose was more significant than his immediate concerns. So he prayed three times, "And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will'" (Matthew 26:39).

It is critical to being a spiritual person who lives his/her spirituality that the person never forgets (not even God's own son forgot) that "my" purpose is always less important than God's purpose. We must identify and progressively understand God's purpose to distinguish between "my" purpose and God's purpose.

The unending goal we have is twofold. (a) We must constantly grow in understanding God's continuing purpose. (b) We must constantly yield our immediate purpose to God's continuing purpose. The fact that people can be useful to God as He achieves His purpose witnesses to the importance of people to God.

Focus your life as a Christian on the fact that God has an objective. Constantly grow in understanding of what that objective is.

For Thought and Discussion:

1. What common problem exists among humans?

Humans tend to weave their immediate concerns into the fabric of their religious faith.

2. What did (does) God have in Jesus Christ that He has in no one or nothing else?

God has a purpose in Jesus Christ He has in no one or nothing else.

3. What is the basic promise God made to Abraham?

A blessing will come to everyone on earth through the descendants of Abraham.

4. What did God intend Israel to be to the nations?

He intended Israel to be a light to the nations.

5. What is more important than our immediate concerns?

God's purpose is more important than our immediate concerns.

6. What are the Christian's twofold, unending goals?

- a. *We must constantly grow in understanding God's continuing purpose.*
- b. *We must constantly yield our immediate purpose to God's continuing purpose.*

Lesson Nine

The Insignificance of Arrogance

Text: 3 John

The purpose of this lesson: To emphasize the importance of faith over control.

Consider the common dream of many who abuse freedom. What is this common dream dreamed by many? It is the dream of answering to no one! For some, the "true" definition of freedom is (a) having the right to do as you please 100% of the time and (b) having to answer to no one any of the time.

Emphasize that what a person expects from freedom depends on his/her definition of freedom. My freedom is not achieved by the abuse of other people.

Years ago a child in my extended family started to school for a half day of kindergarten. Upon returning home the first day, the child was asked, "How was it? Did you like it?" The immediate response was this: "It was great but I do not think I will go back tomorrow." You and I laugh in our knowledge that returning was not a real choice. Life is filled with "have tos." Seemingly, the older we get, the more "have tos" become part of our lives.

Have the class share some of the common "have tos" that are a part of adult existence.

Typically people handle their dream of being free from "have tos" by (a) seeking to make others "have to" do what "I" say [seeking control] or (b) by committing themselves to being rebellious. Their approach is either "You have to do what I tell you to do!" or "You cannot tell me what to do!" Thus the concept of freedom is being in control or being out of anyone's control. Either attitude is in striking contrast to Paul's admonition to Galatian Christians:

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another (Galatians 5:13-15).

Have the class share some of the common ways adults often use to escape adult "have tos."

In 3 John there is a fascinating contrast between Gaius and Diotrephes. To receive the full impact of the contrast, we need to first understand a little about the situation. In the last part of the first century in sections of the Roman world it was not popular (a) to be a Christian or (b) to share the Christian message. In such areas, there were few (if any) material advantages to being a Christian who shared his/her Savior with others. Some

insights into the difficulties a Christian faith sharer could anticipate can be seen in Paul's list of hardships in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33.

Have someone read 2 Corinthians 11:23-33. Discuss some of the hardships an evangelist could anticipate in those days.

One form of the powerful encouragement a Christian could anticipate at that time was their reception by other Christians. Remember, there was no mechanical printing then as now, and no form of mass communication. The only Christian news and teaching those Christians received often was by word-of-mouth from other Christians traveling through. To have Christian teachers spend the night with you was a wonderful opportunity! Your hospitality encouraged them, and their information encouraged you! The personal contact between people who had committed to the resurrected Jesus Christ was a major blessing to people who had faith in Jesus. They shared friendship because of a shared faith, not because they had a history of knowing each other.

In a time when there were no books and no easily, cheaply owned scripture, discuss the value of having an informed believer in Christ spend the night in your home.

Gaius was a major sharer and encourager (verses 5-8). He felt a major bond with those who "went out for the sake of the Name," and he refused to take anything for the kindness he extended. He was a major encourager of others in what you and I would regard as a bleak world situation.

Discuss how encouraging it would be to have homes opened to you if you were a traveling Christian. Note such encouragement is available to us today. Discuss the sacrifices and inconveniences involved.

Diotrephes, on the other hand, was in stark contrast to Gaius. He did not befriend and encourage other Christians as they came through. He seemingly was one of those anxious Christians who "took no chances in preserving the status quo." Not only was he not one who supported and encouraged other Christians who as "strangers" (verse 5) were going out for "the sake of the Name," but he was in position to control other Christians who would offer such encouragement (verse 10). He was even in position to keep a letter from John from the church.

Discuss why people who seek control feel threatened by others' acts of unselfishness.

Diotrephes looked upon such encouragement to unknown people as a threat to his control. He had to be the person in control. He had to issue the "have tos." He perceived kindness that he did not personally authorize as a threat. For the "truth" to be preserved, he had to be in control. For the church to be secure, he had to be in control.

Discuss how a person's control outlook affects what he/she sees and his/her view of what "might happen."

When the writer wrote verse 11 [Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God] he likely spoke of Gaius and Diotrephes. Gaius did good; Diotrephes did not. God could be seen in the works of Gaius; God could not be seen in the works of Diotrephes. So follow the example of Gaius, not Diotrephes.

Emphasize the contrast between Gaius and Diotrephes.

Please note Diotrephes was characterized as "evil," "unjust," and "wicked." Because he did not believe in Jesus Christ? No! Because he opposed Christian kindness! Promoting the truth does not depend on "putting people out of the church," but it depends on encouraging those who are God's people. The key is not control. The key is kindness.

Note the contrast between the desire for control and the willingness to function by faith in Jesus Christ. Note the desire to exert control is often an expression of faith in self rather than faith in God.

Because people are important to God, they are to be encouraged in acts of righteous kindness.

Being kind to people is the primary way of showing the value of people.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What is the common dream of many who abuse freedom?

The common dream is having to answer to no one.

2. Illustrate what a "have to" is.

A "have to" is a responsibility the person must assume to maintain his/her quality of life.

3. In what two ways do people typically handle desires to be free from "have tos"?

They either seek control or rebel.

4. What was Paul's admonition to Galatian Christians?

His admonition was to use freedom to serve through love.

5. What fascinating contrast does 3 John make?

It makes a contrast between Gaius and Diotrephes.

6. In the last part of the first century, what was not popular in sections of the Roman world?

It was not popular to be a Christian or to share the Christian message.

7. What were some of Paul's hardships in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33?

Labors, imprisonment, beatings, the possibility of death, dangerous travel, dangerous situations among Jewish people and non-Jewish people, dangerous situations among false Christians, hardship, hunger, thirst, exposure, stress, and the need to escape were among those hardships.

8. What was a powerful encouragement a Christian could anticipate?

A powerful encouragement was their reception by other Christians.

9. What was an important source of Christian news?

An important source of news was the word-of-mouth of other Christians traveling through.

10. What was Gaius?

Gaius was an encourager who shared.

11. What was Diotrephes?

Diotrephes was an anxious person who did not encourage or share.

12. Why was Diotrephes characterized as "evil," "unjust," and "wicked"?

He was considered such because he opposed Christian kindness.

13. What is and is not the key?

Kindness is the key. Control is not the key.