

# 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."

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.

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!

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.

(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.

(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.

(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.

(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.

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.

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."

### **For Thought and Discussion:**

1. Often, what effect does the passing of time have on human thinking?
2. In our emphasis today, what did Paul say about resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19?
3. What would John issue in the writing we know as 1 John?
4. Christians would not take John's requests seriously unless what was true?
5. In John's introduction, on who did he place emphasis?
6. Who was among those people?
7. Rather than sharing an impression, what was John sharing?
8. What did John say about Jesus?
9. What did John want his original readers to clearly understand about his message?
10. What was the core reason for John sharing this message?

## Lesson Two

# God's Perfect Solution to Sin

**Text: 1 John 1:5-10**

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.

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.

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.

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.

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).

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).

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.

(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.

(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.

(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.

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.

### **For Thought and Discussion:**

1. What is this lesson intended to do? Why?
2. What two (of many) complex studies/searches in scripture are mentioned in this lesson?
3. What is concept one presented in this lesson?
4. What is concept two?
5. What is concept three?
6. What is the first thing called to your attention?
7. What is the second thing?
8. What is the third thing?

9. What is the fourth thing?

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

## Lesson Three

# The Hatred of Brethren

**Text: 1 John 2:1-11**

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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).

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.

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.

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.

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.

### **For Thought and Discussion**

1. How did John wish to make certain his last paragraph in chapter 1 was not misunderstood?
2. In God's solution to our sin problem, what two roles does Jesus serve? Explain those roles.
3. How can Christians make themselves liars?
4. Explain how the command to love is both an old and new commandment.
5. Discuss the practical aspects of loving those committed to Jesus who differ from us.

## Lesson Four

# The Sense of Privilege

**Text: 1 John 3:1-12**

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.)

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.

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).

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!

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

## **For Thought and Discussion**

1. What type of commitment is discussed in this lesson?
2. What have we too often exchanged? Why?
3. What are four terrible prices we now pay because of that exchange?
4. Who was John? What did he grasp?
5. Why is it difficult for us to "see" what John "saw"?
6. What else did John emphasize?
7. What three additional things did John stress in our text?
8. What tightrope did John walk?

## Lesson Five

# The Power of Love for Christians

**Text: 1 John 3:13-24**

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.

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"?

(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.

(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.

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.

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.

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 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."

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.

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!

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.

### **For Thought and Discussion**

1. Discuss the fact that people are "hard to love."
2. Discuss the fact that God loves us.

3. What is our first complete example for hatred? Why did Cain hate Abel?
4. In our text, in John's emphasis, who are the "world"?
5. What striking appeal do Christians have among non-Christians ?
6. What enormous transition does the church face?
7. Discuss what **IS** and **IS NOT** the objective of God's church.

## Lesson Six

# Godliness: A Matter of Godly Character

**Text: 1 John 4:7-21**

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.

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.

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.

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?

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?

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.

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.

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 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.

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!

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

### **For Thought and Discussion**

1. What is the focus of today's lesson?
2. What can happen when a Christian becomes consumed with a technical focus in spiritual considerations?
3. What focus can easily replace a focus on Jesus Christ?
4. What two challenges face the Christian on a daily basis?
5. John wrote to Christians who struggled with what?
6. Discuss this statement: "God is not displayed; He is evidenced."
7. Who defines what it means to love?
8. How did God introduce us to His definition of love?
9. God's kind of love refuses to do what?
10. Who sees God?
11. What are Christians not ashamed to acknowledge?
12. God's love for us was a matter of \_\_\_\_\_; thus our love for each other and God is a matter of \_\_\_\_\_.

## Lesson Seven

# Obedience and Love Do Not Exclude Each Other

**Text: 1 John 5:1-12**

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?

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.

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 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."

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

### **For Thought and Discussion**

1. What question does every person ask consciously or subconsciously?
2. What statement from Jesus did John's gospel record?
3. In the context of 1 John, what two attitudes did his readers often encounter?
4. What two facts did John note about spiritual birth?
5. Give examples of the inadequacy of a faith that does not express itself in obedience.
6. What did John say about love for a parent?
7. What did John say loving God and practicing His teachings would produce?
8. Is obeying God humanly impossible? Explain your answer.
9. In 1 John, who are "the world"?
10. What did God's forgiveness always involve?
11. What were the witnesses of the Christian cleansing?

## Lesson Eight

# Be Careful of Who You Let Influence You

### Text: 2 John

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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).

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.

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 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).

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.

### **For Thought and Discussion:**

1. What common problem exists among humans?
2. What did (does) God have in Jesus Christ that He has in no one or nothing else?
3. What is the basic promise God made to Abraham?

4. What did God intend Israel to be to the nations?
5. What is more important than our immediate concerns?
6. What are the Christian's twofold, unending goals?

## Lesson Nine

# The Insignificance of Arrogance

### Text: 3 John

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.

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.

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:

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

### **For Thought and Discussion**

1. What is the common dream of many who abuse freedom?
2. Illustrate what a "have to" is.
3. In what two ways do people typically handle desires to be free from "have tos"?
4. What was Paul's admonition to Galatian Christians?
5. What fascinating contrast does 3 John make?
6. In the last part of the first century, what was not popular in sections of the Roman world?
7. What were some of Paul's hardships in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33?
8. What was a powerful encouragement a Christian could anticipate?
9. What was an important source of Christian news?
10. What was Gaius?
11. What was Diotrephes?
12. Why was Diotrephes characterized as "evil," "unjust," and "wicked"?
13. What is and is not the key?