

# I John

## Introduction

John's first epistle was written toward the end of the apostle's life probably from Ephesus in or around ad 90 (just prior to the beginning of great persecution under the Roman Emperor Domitian). The letter has neither salutation nor superscription and therefore is properly regarded as one of the "general" epistles.

The letter was written in an atmosphere of apostasy that was threatening the church from within. There were several errors that were being taught to John's readers. Apparently some of the false teachers had split off from the church and formed their own group (2:19) and then began efforts to persuade others to follow (2:26).

Some of these regarded themselves as the "spiritual elite" among brethren and taught things contrary to what the apostles had taught, especially in regard to the nature of Christ. They denied the significance of the humanity of Jesus and, therefore, that Jesus in the flesh could not have been the Messiah (2:22). That led to a view that salvation came from illumination—a deeper knowledge, hence "Gnostics" from the Greek for "knowledge," *gnosis* (see below)—instead of revelation. Thus, they sought a higher level of knowledge for knowledge's sake, instead of heeding what they had learned "from the beginning" (1:1; 2:7, 13, 14, 24; 3:8, 11).

John answers their elitism by stating over and over that Christians should love one another. This is similar to Paul's answer to another group of elitists in I Corinthians 12-14. The Corinthians were taking pride in their gifts and setting up a class system based on who had the "greater" gifts. Paul told them that without love, your gifts were useless.

Some of the false teachers were saying that if and when you reach the higher spiritual plane, the body really doesn't matter and, therefore, you cannot sin in the physical realm. But John says that those who say they have no sin are liars and make God a liar (1:8, 10). Only those who confess their sins can be cleansed from all unrighteousness (1:9) and that happens through the advocacy of Jesus Christ (2:1), not through "illumination" or "enlightenment."

An early form of this heresy known as "Gnosticism" appeared in some churches during John's time, although it was not fully developed until the mid- to late-second century. However, to understand John's book, we should have some familiarity with this heresy.

## Gnosticism

Gnosticism was a form of heretical teaching that sprung up in many churches in the second century A.D. However, the roots of Gnosticism were beginning to spread in the late first century, when John wrote his letters and his gospel. A "Gnostic" felt he had special insight into God's will for man and he alone was qualified to teach God's will.

The basic tenet of Gnostic teaching was that only spirit was good and all matter was essentially evil. Adherents believed that the one main aim in life is to liberate man's spirit from the "vile prison-house of the body." The teaching took many forms.

There were other false teachers during this time, of course, but much of their teaching later became part of the Gnostic heresy. Some denied the Messiahship of Jesus (see I Jn 2:22) and others denied His incarnation (4:2-3). The denial of the incarnation of Jesus is essential in Gnosticism since they held that matter (and hence the *body*) was inherently evil. (John Calvin's philosophy just turned this around; he taught that the *spirit* of man is inherently evil or "totally depraved.")

The following is an excerpt from a Bible Dictionary on "Gnosticism":<sup>1</sup>

...there is evidence that there was a good deal of "gnosticizing" thought even in the first century c.e. A question still in debate is the extent of "gnostic" influence on the New Testament, since the evidence has to be found in the New Testament itself,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Gnosticism, by Robert McL. Wilson, p. 256

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and there is always a danger of interpreting it in light of later systems, which may be to impose on it the ideas of a later period. There is still no gnostic document that in its present form can be dated prior to the New Testament.

The chief characteristics common to all the developed systems are: (1) a radical cosmic dualism that rejects this world and all that belongs to it; the body is a prison from which the soul longs to escape; (2) a distinction between the unknown transcendent true God and the creator or Demiurge, commonly identified with the God of the Hebrew Bible; (3) the belief that the human race is essentially akin to the divine, being a spark of heavenly light imprisoned in a material body; (4) a myth, often narrating a premundane fall, to account for the present human predicament; and (5) the saving knowledge by which deliverance is effected and the gnostic awakened to recognition of his or her true nature and heavenly origin. At one time it was thought, as the church fathers sometimes allege, that the gnostic was “saved by nature, and that mortality was therefore of no importance; indeed, since ethics is largely a matter of obedience to the law of the creator, who seeks to hold the human race in slavery, it could be seen as a positive duty for the gnostic to disobey all such commands. The evidence of the Nag Hammadi documents, however, suggests that while some gnostics may have shown libertine tendencies, the main direction of the movement was toward asceticism. Some of the characteristics listed can be identified in other systems of thought, but that does not make these gnostic; it is the combination of those ideas into a new synthesis that is Gnosticism.

The idea that the body was evil and therefore Christ could not have actually lived on earth in the flesh, culminated in two major views:

- *Docetism* taught that Jesus only seemed to have a body; i.e., He was a “phantom.”
- The doctrine of *Cerinthus*. He drew a definite distinction between the human Jesus and the divine Christ. He said that Jesus was a man, born in a perfectly natural way, who lived in special obedience to God. After His baptism the Christ, in the shape of a dove, descended upon Him. The Christ then, according to Cerinthus, left the body of Jesus prior to His suffering on the cross. Therefore, Jesus as the Christ never really suffered at all (Read I Jn. 5:6 with this information in mind).

One great danger in this heresy is that it arises from mistaken reverence. It is afraid to ascribe to Jesus full humanity because of its bias against the human body. One emphasis in I John is that man’s salvation is dependent on the full identification of Jesus Christ with him.

Gnostic belief led to certain destructive consequences in the lives of those who held it. The attitude about the body and the things of the body led to any one of three possible views:

**ASCETICISM** – fasting and celibacy and rigid control, even deliberate ill-treatment of the body. The view that celibacy is better than marriage and that sex, except for procreation, is a sin can be traced partially, at least, Gnostic belief. There is no trace of that particular view in this letter, however.

**LICENTIOUSNESS** – Since the body is unimportant, its appetites may be gratified without limit. There is some evidence in the letter that this view was held, in some form. See I Jn 1:6; 2:4-6 (cf. Jude 3). Some Gnostics took this even further: in order to realize *complete* knowledge, a person must enter into every experience, good or bad; i.e., he had an obligation to sin (see Rev. 2:24; I Jn. 1:5). These Gnostics held that you must penetrate the veil of both light *and* darkness.

**SPIRITUAL PERFECTION** – Because of the special knowledge that these Gnostics claimed, they felt they were above sin. John addressed them in I Jn. 1:8-10.

Gnosticism also led to an attitude that was detrimental to fellowship between fellow Christians. Gnostics claimed a special insight into God’s will, clearly not for every man. Most people were too involved in everyday life to ever have the time for the study and discipline necessary to achieve this level of knowledge; and even if they had such time, they were probably intellectually incapable of handling the involved speculations and rituals of the philosophy. This, of course, resulted in two classes of people in the church. To the Gnostics, all non-Gnostics were second-class citizens. In fact, they considered themselves the spiritual “aristocracy” and looked with contempt, even hatred, upon those who would never know what real religion was all about (see 1:7; 2:9-11; 3:14-17; 3:23; 4:7-8; 4:10-12; 4:20-21).

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## Purpose of the Letter

John's reasons for writing the letter are spelled out in four purpose statements: (1) 1:4, "These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete" (the NKJV, "that your joy may be full"). (2) 2:1, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (3) 2:26, "These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you." (4) 5:13, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life."

John also makes two great affirmations about God: "God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1:5); and "God is love" (4:7-10,16). These two statements should be viewed in light of the apostasy that was occurring in John's time. Those who sin and do not love their brother "abide in darkness" and therefore cannot be children of God (see 2:8-11).

Because the main attack by the false teachers was on the person of Christ, this letter is especially helpful in what it has to say about Jesus:

- Jesus was from the beginning; He is eternal (1:1; 2:14).
- Jesus is the Son of God (4:15; 5:5).
- Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah (2:22; 5:1).
- Jesus was fully human. To deny it is the spirit of the "Antichrist" (4:2-3; cf. 1:1,3; 5:6; 3:16).
- Jesus came to deal with sin (3:5; 1:7-10; 3:5).
  1. He is our advocate with the Father (2:1).
  2. He is the propitiation for our sins (2:2; 4:10)
- Believing in Jesus gives life (4:9; 5:11,12).
- Jesus is the Savior of the world (4:14)

The letter also deals with the world (3:1,13; 4:4,5; 5:4,19), which has a special meaning in John's writings. "World" refers to the hostility and lust found in the world, not the green earth itself. It is the code word for all that is hostile and foreign to God and godliness. This world and its lust are doomed to pass away (2:17).

John also touches on the practical matter of fellowship. No New Testament writer stresses fellowship more consistently or more strenuously. John was convinced that we are not only bound to God but that we are also bound to each other (1:7; 2:9-11; 3:11-17,23; 4:7-12; 4:20, 21). John was convinced that the best way to prove your love for God is to prove your love for your brother.

No letter makes a stronger case for the necessity of righteousness than this. See 2:29; 3:3-10; 5:2,18. Those born of God do not practice sin. Knowledge of God's commands is essential to keeping them; keeping His commands prove we truly know Him (2:3-5). Only with this as a basis can we offer effective prayer (3:22). So, says John, the marks of genuine Christianity are love of the brethren and obedience to the revealed commands.

## Who was John?

While John is never mentioned in the letter, he is generally regarded as the author of it. First, there is a strong tradition dating back to the early church that John was the author. There are also striking similarities in style and content between the letter and the gospel of John. Many of the same themes are found here: light and darkness, love and hate, truth and falsehood. Internally, the book says that the author was one of the eyewitnesses of Jesus (1:1-2).

John was the son of Zebedee, a (probably) well-to-do fisherman of Galilee (Mk 1:20). His mother was Salome (Mt. 27:56) and he had a younger brother named James. Jesus once referred to the brothers as the "Sons of Thunder" (Mk. 3:17). He was a friend of Peter (Acts 4:13; 8:14-25) and one of the "pillars" in the Jerusalem church. Though John was from Bethsaida, he apparently went to Ephesus, from which he wrote the gospel and his epistles before being exiled to the Isle of Patmos where he received and recorded the Revelation.

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John is known as the apostle of “love,” but he had to learn it over time. Early in his life, he was somewhat intolerant (see Mk 9:38) and ambitious (Mk 10:35-37). John was described as the “disciple that Jesus loved” (Jn. 21:20), implying a close relationship with Jesus. This was confirmed when Jesus committed His mother to John’s care (Jn 19:26-27). There is a tradition that when John was very old and unable even to stand alone, that he would motion for someone to help him to his feet in the assembly and, leaning on his cane, admonish the congregation to love one another.

Matthew, Mark and Luke emphasize the works of Jesus in their gospels. John’s gospel, however, gives more insight into what Jesus was feeling and thinking, perhaps to emphasize his humanity that much more. For examples of the similarities in the gospel and the epistle, compare I Jn. 1:1-3 and Jn. 1:1; I Jn. 4:9 and Jn. 3:16; I Jn. 5:7-12 and Jn 5:31-39.

## Outline

I John is a difficult book to outline. John’s letter is not organized in a logical sequence, like, for instance, Paul’s letter to the Romans. Instead, the structure is more spiral-like. C. H. Dodd made this observation: “for the development of a theme often brings us back almost to the starting point; almost, but not quite, for there is a slight shift which provides a transition to a fresh theme; or it may be a theme which had apparently been dismissed at an earlier point and now comes up for consideration from a slightly different angle.”

Three dominant themes emerge and are repeated throughout the book: keeping the commandments, loving the brethren, and belief in Jesus as the Christ. By way of application, it would be profitable for the student to view the letter as a test with three parts: I. “Do I love the brethren?” (Social Test). II. “Am I keeping the commandments?” (Moral Test). III. “Do I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?” (Doctrinal Test).

With that in mind, here is a proposed outline (from Stephen Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 1, 2, 3 John, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv).

- I. Preface (1:1-4) The Word of Life
- II. Live in the Light (1:5-2:29)
  - (a) God is Light (1:5-7)
  - (b) First Condition for living in the Light: Renounce Sin (1:8-2:2)
  - (c) Second Condition: Be Obedient (2:3-11)
  - (d) Third Condition: Reject Worldliness (2:12-17)
  - (e) Fourth Condition: Keep the Faith (2:18-29)
- III. Live as Children of God (3:1—5:13)
  - (a) God Is Father (3:1-3)
  - (b) First Condition for Living as God’s Children: Renounce Sin (3:4-9)
  - (c) Second Condition: Be Obedient (3:10-24)
    - (d) Third Condition: Reject Worldliness (4:1-6)
    - (e) Fourth Condition: Be Loving (4:7—5:4)
    - (f) Fifth Condition: Keep the Faith (5:5-13)
- IV. Conclusion (5:14-21) Christian Confidence

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# I John 1:1-4

## Introduction (1-3) & Purpose (4)

John begins his letter with a direct assault on the docetists, who insisted that Jesus never had a human body but was a phantom in human form. He appeals to three of the five senses to prove that Jesus was flesh. In his own experience, he had heard, seen and even touched Jesus (whom he calls the “Word of life”). He and the other apostles were eyewitness (v. 2) and what they saw, they declared so that they (and we) might have fellowship with them, fellowship that derives from the Father and Son.

Notice the striking caparison with the gospel of John:

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (Jn 1:1-5).

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14).

Compare also Jn. 17:13, 20-21 with I Jn. 1:3.

Key Thought: “We proclaim to you the Eternal Life”

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

## WORD STUDY: “Fellowship”

(Gk. *koinonia*) joint-participation, sharing, communion, partnership. Fellowship requires faith in the Father and Son — they are it’s object; there must be personal, intellectual faith which identifies one with the Son; one must become a “partaker of the divine nature” (II Pet. 1:4), i.e., undergo a transforming fellowship; this fellowship causes you to feel as they feel and think as they think; and this fellowship is one of joy — the joy of complete submission to God and Christ (Lk 10:21). Fellowship with each other depends on this fellowship with God and Christ. The vertical relationship (man with God) must be in place before the horizontal relationship (man with man) can exist in any real sense.

C. B. D. Cranfield writes, “Christian [fellowship] consists of a twofold relationship. It is at the same time both a vertical relationship (the sharing together of Christians in and with Christ) and also a horizontal (the sharing together of Christians in and with Christ)...We must now look at the horizontal, the relationship that exists between Christians as a result of their common sharing in Christ and his benefits. Many passages might be cited to illustrate this, including those already cited under (a). (See also I John 1.3,7.) This relationship is expressed in love and unity, in mutual sympathy and service. It is of the utmost importance to realize that these two relationships are for the NT quite inseparable. The vertical is the origin of the horizontal, while the outward expression of the horizontal is at the same time the sign and pledge of the reality of the vertical. In exhortations to brotherly love, appeal is constantly made to the fact of the common sharing in Christ and his gifts (e.g. Phil. 2.1f.; cf. the connexion between I Cor. 1:9 and 10). So Christians are to love one another as Christ has loved them (John 13.34)...” (Theological Wordbook of the Bible, Alan Richardson, ed., 1950, the MacMillan Co., p. 82

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## QUESTIONS

1. In reading through the book, do you feel you are reading (a) a text book (b) a friendly letter (c) a formal letter or (d) a story
2. What affirmations does John make about Christ in the first three verses?
3. Why did John write the letter? (Answer from the text). Why would he be concerned with this matter?
4. Which comes first, fellowship with each other or fellowship with God?
5. What are the three main "tests" in the letter?

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# I John 1:5-2:29

## The Basis of Fellowship (1:5-7)

John's point in 1:5 through 2:29 is that God is light and totally devoid of any darkness. That great truth carries various implications that John develops in this section. In 1:5-7, John stresses the fact that our fellowship with God is conditional upon our "walking in the light" and that in this fellowship with God we enjoy the cleansing of our sins by the blood of Jesus Christ if we confess our sins (1:9, note the many uses of the word "if" throughout this whole section).

As you study these verses, note that there is a great truth stated (the "message" of v. 5), a solemn warning given (v. 6) and faithful assurance provided (v. 7). Also, realize that to understand these verses completely they need to be studied in the context of the whole section (1:5-2:29). In addition, you should review the background information provided earlier.

1:5-7 This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 7 but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Key thought: Our fellowship with God is conditional because God is light.

## WORD STUDY: "walk"

(Gk., ean peripatomen) "keep on walking, continuous walk, practice, manner of life." "Walking in the light" is the conscious and sustained endeavor to live a life in conformity with the revelation of God who is "light" especially as that revelation has been made finally and completely in Jesus Christ and this is the necessary condition of fellowship." A. E. Brooke, ICC, Epistles of John, 1912

## QUESTIONS

1. List the qualities of light and then do the same for "darkness." What do these metaphors tell you about God?
2. How many times in this section does John say "if we say" or "he who says"?
3. Describe the false teachers who were saying "we have fellowship with God" but then did not live a pure life?
4. Why is it important that what we say and what we do be the same?
5. Does this passage provide any basis upon which to judge the actions of others?
6. After reading the entire section, describe one who is "walking in the light."

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# I John 1:5-2:29

## Sin—Fact, Confession & Forgiveness (1:8-2:2)

In vs. 5-7, John says that we have fellowship with God and each other as long as we “walk in the light.” Some may have been claiming perfect fellowship with God that would imply perfection— i.e., life without sin. John says, in vs. 8, that when one says “we have no sin\*,” he deceives himself and the truth is not in him. “We have no sin” denies the principle of sin as a power in the world. The man who thinks this is deceived because he thinks he is free from having to confront sin. “The truth is not in him” because the truth (God’s revelation) testifies that “all sin and fall short of God’s glory” (Rom. 3:23).

In v. 8, John is refuting those who deny sin is a force to be reckoned with. Some were denying the principle of sin as a power that can influence us. John affirms that it is and that it afflicts everyone. In v. 10, he answers the man who may acknowledge sin as a principle, but deny that it has affected him personally. “Yes, sin is a problem, but I have not sinned.” Again, God’s word says “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:8-20, 23); to make oneself an exception is to deny God’s revelation and impugn the veracity of God.

In between these statements that contest the idea that sin is not an issue in the life of a believer, v. 9, says that if we confess\* our sins, instead of denying them, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. Note that the word “sins” is plural in v. 9. While we do not practice sin as a way of life (3:9), it is still a force to be reckoned with throughout our earthly walk. We will always have sins (acts of disobedience) to confess and be forgiven of.

While acknowledging that all sin, John says that he is writing this letter that we may not sin. John’s general view of sin is that of a characteristic or condition of sinfulness. In other words, John is usually talking about the practice of sin more than the commission of a single sin. In 2:1, however, the Greek suggests that John is talking about single acts of sin: he is writing to help us avoid those occasions when we “miss the mark.” (The verb, “may not sin,” is an “aorist” which refers to single act, not a state of being).

If we commit sin we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ (see I Tim 2:5). The word for “advocate” is the same word translated “helper” in John 14:26, *paraklitos*\*). Our Advocate is the one who died for us that our sins might be forgiven and continues to intercede on our behalf. He is our propitiation\* for our sins. Not only for ours, but for all who would accept Him in faith.

1:8-2:2 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us. **2** My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of* the whole world.

**KEY THOUGHT:** We are forgiven our sins if we do not practice sin and if we confess our occasional sins.

## Word Studies: “sin,” “confess,” “Advocate,” “propitiation”

“sin” (Gk., *hamartia*) “a failure to hit the mark.” It can be the action itself, a condition or characteristic or the power that deceives.

“confess” (Gk., *homologeō*). In v. 9, it is present active (i.e., continuous action) and means to say the same thing, to agree, to concede, to admit, to confess.

“Advocate” (*paraklitos*). Comforter (see Jn. 14:16, 26). Called to one’s aid, therefore, (1) one who pleads another’s case before a judge (2) an intercessor (3) in widest sense — “helper.”

“propitiation” (*hilasmos* (in John); *hilasteron* (in Paul) = expiation, sin-offering, an appeasing; or that which expiates or propitiates. In Heb 9:5, mercy-seat can be translated “propitiatory,” i.e., the place (cover of the ark of the covenant) where the blood was sprinkled for the sins of the people; the place where the High Priest would come into the presence of God on annual Day of Atonement. Propitiation involves the turning away of the wrath of God which we justly deserve; it is a personal word involving what Christ did for us – he went to the cross that the wrath of God might not come upon us.

## QUESTIONS

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1. Explain “have no sin” (v. 8) or “have not sinned” (v. 10). What are the consequences of denying our sins?

2. What are the benefits of confessing our sins? What does “confess” mean?

3. Does “confession” of sins necessarily mean we must keep track of every sin we commit and confess it specifically?

4. John said “I these things that you may not sin...” Has John said anything in chapter 1 that might help you avoid sin? What?

5.(Extra Credit) Read about the Jewish practice of sacrifice on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. Also read about it in Hebrews, especially chapters 7-9. Describe how this explains the idea of Christ’s “propitiation.”

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# I John 1:5-2:29

## The True Knowledge of God (2:3-6)

John's states his purpose in writing this letter in both 1:4 ("that your joy may be full") and in 2:1("that you may not sin"). He also says, in 5:13 that he had written these things "that you may know you have eternal life..." What evidence do you have that you are in fact "walking in the light" and therefore destined to eternal life? Remember the atmosphere in which John is writing these words. The Gnostics taught that they were the only ones who had a true knowledge of God. Yet, they also taught that what one did in the flesh didn't matter; sin was not a factor. John says here in 2:3 that "we know that we (truly) know Him if..."

We know that we do sin (1:8,10), so eternal life is not based on sinless perfection. We know that God has given us a divine remedy for our sin (2:1-2 with 1:7, 9). So what signs do we have that we have taken advantage of the remedy? John offers two: (1) the sign of knowledge with its evidence of obedience; (2) the sign of union, with its evidence of imitation. If we are growing in the true knowledge of God we will keep His commandments (obedience). This "knowledge" is the kind we gain in a relationship, not the kind you get from books). "Keeping His commandments" is the same as keeping His word (2:5) which is the same thing as obedience. Failure to keep His commandments (as a manner of life) is proof that one does not really know Him. Saying you know Him without keeping His commandments (His word) makes you a liar, the truth (i.e., God's divine will) is not in him.

Keeping His commandments corresponds to "walking in the light"(1:7) and having fellowship with Him (1:3). Also, keeping His commandments (His word) is evidence, too, that the love of God is "perfected" or "meeting its goal" in the Christian (cf. 3:6; 4:17-19; 5:3). When God's love dwells in our hearts through faith, we always seek to keep His commandments. To those Gnostics for who the "knowledge of God" implied no moral imperative, John says they are "liars." Only those who keep His commandments are entitled to say that they truly "know God."

John also takes up the subject of our union with God. Keeping His commandments shows we "are in Him"(2:5). This union with God also produces moral conduct consistent with that of our calling in Christ. We "walk just as He walked"(2:6) and "walk in the light just as He is in the Light"(1:7). When we do that, we "abide" in Him.

## Word Study: "commandments," "abide"

"commandments" (Gk., entole). To enjoin, order (v., "command") or the injunction, order, commandment (noun). "The word must be understood in reference to the personal activity by which God exercises authority over all things" (W. A. Whitehouse, Theological Wordbook of the Bible, p. 49). In I John, "commandment" may refer specifically to the command to love, or to the command to believe in Jesus, or to commandments in general. Context must determine which meaning applies in a given case.

"abide" (Gk., meno) occurs 27 times in this short epistle. Of the 120 times it occurs in the NT, John uses it 72 times in his four books. It is variously translated "dwell," "continue," "tarry," "remain," and "endure." Thayer says: "Christians are said to be rooted... in Him, knit to Him by the spirit they have received from Him." (See Jn. 6:56)

2:3-6 By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. <sup>4</sup> The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; <sup>5</sup> but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: <sup>6</sup> the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

**KEY THOUGHT:** Keeping the commandments of God is evidence of a true knowledge of Him.

## Questions

1. How do we know if we "know God"?

2. In whom is the love of God perfected?

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3. What is evidence that we “abide in Him”?

4. Can you “know” Jesus if you don’t take time to learn His commandments?

5. Analyze John 15:1-7 in light of I John 2:3-6.

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# I John 1:5-2:29

## The New and Old Commandment (2:7-11)

To “walk as He walked”(2:6) is not at all a new commandment but, in fact, the essence of the practical gospel. Throughout the New Testament we are urged by all the writers to “imitate Jesus,” to “have the mind of Christ” and “walk worthy of your calling.” This is “the word which you heard from the beginning”(v.7).

Our efforts to behave as Christians ought to behave proves our love for God and is expressed in our love for each other (the brethren). The commandment to love one another is not “new” in the sense of being new in time, since it is a command that we find repeated many times in the Old Testament (see Lev 19:18; Mic 6:8). The “newness” of the commandment is that we are to love in a new way — like Christ! The extent or measure of our love is to be greater than the Law required. This is what Jesus meant in Jn. 13:34. Before Jesus, no one had exemplified love as He had; He was love personified. We are to imitate Him (Mt 5:48). When we do this, we are walking in the light with Jesus — we have put off the things of darkness (Rom 13:12).

On the other side is the person who claims to be in the light and yet hates his brother (v.9). Remember the Gnostic heresy again — they claimed to be the “enlightened” ones yet looked with contempt on their less “sophisticated” brethren. This individual is still in the darkness and is spiritually blind (v.11). There are a number of ways that this “hate” may manifest itself. He may regard his brother as one who isn’t worth much, because he doesn’t have as much ability. Or he may regard him with contempt, perhaps because of the way he looks or dresses. He may just consider him a nuisance, because of his personality. Or he may consider him an enemy, as one with whom he must compete for attention.

“If one is... for God, the principle of his life is love; the sphere in which he moves is light; the desire of his heart is obedience.” (Guy N Woods, Commentary on 1st & 2d Peter, the Epistles of John and Jude).

2:7-11 Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. 8 On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining. 9 The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. 10 The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. 11 But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

KEY THOUGHT: Walking with God involves obedience to God and sincere love of the brethren

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## Questions

1. In what sense is the commandment “not new”? In what sense is it “new”?
2. What does it mean to be “in darkness”?
3. What do words mean, if our actions show otherwise?
4. What does “no cause for stumbling” mean (v. 10)?
5. If one does not love his brother, what does it prove about him?

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# I John 1:5-2:29

## Things Eternal & Things Temporal (2:12-17)

John now turns again to the reason why he is writing (Gk., grapho—"I write"; egraspa—"I have written") as he had done in 1:4 ("that your joy may be full") and 2:1 ("that you may not sin"). This time, he addresses certain classes individually—"little children," "fathers" and "young men." The exact interpretation of these verses has puzzled expositors for centuries, especially with regard to the change of tense ("I write" to "I have written") and the terms used to describe those whom he is addressing.

The most plausible explanation may be to regard "I have written" as an "epistolary aorist." That is, John first considers his letter as in the process of transcription, still incomplete (e.g., II Cor 13:10) and then as it is ideally complete. Compare vss. 21, 26; 5:13; I Pet 5:12.

With regard to the form of address, it's interesting to note, first, that the English words ("little children") of vss. 12 & 13 are different in the Greek. In the original language, vs.12 has teknia, indicating the fact of childhood while vs.13 has paidia, which emphasizes the dependence inherent in childhood or infancy. In both places, it refers to those who are young in the faith ("babes," I Pet 2:1-2), new converts who had just experienced the thrill of having their sins washed away.

Continuing with this spiritual application, we can understand "fathers" to be all of those who have been in Christ for the longest period of time and "young men" to be those who are mature and possessed of great spiritual strength. The terms would answer to the ideas of "thinkers" and "soldiers" — the fathers reflect wisdom ("you have known Him...") and the young men reflect strength ("you have overcome..."). This is why John writes and this is why he has written.

Having set forth the privileges of all Christians as seen in the forgiveness of sins and in the Fatherhood of God, John finds it necessary to warn his readers in verses 15-17—"Do not love the world." "World" does not refer to the green earth, our relationships, our jobs or even our recreations (necessarily). The world, in John's writings, means all that is hostile and opposed to God. He defines these things in the following verses as lust ("illicit desire") of the flesh (our base appetites and desires), lust of the eyes (obsession with what we can see) and the boastful pride of life (pride and its manifestations—arrogance, boasting, conceit, ego-gratification). These three forms serve to define the nature of all sin.

Love of the world is temporary—note that the lust of the world is passing away as well as the world itself. It is foolish to give up the eternal for the earthly, no matter how strong the pull of the earthly. Of course, John's point is even more obvious: love of the world obstructs our love of God. "No man can serve two masters..." Jesus said in Mt. 6:24. Can't be done.

2:12-17 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. <sup>13</sup> I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. <sup>14</sup> I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. <sup>15</sup> Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup> For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. <sup>17</sup> The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

Key thought: Do not love the world

## Questions

1. How are we forgiven "for His names' sake"? (v. 12)
2. Who is the "wicked one" (v. 13)?

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3. How did the “young men” overcome the wicked one? What’s John’s point?
  
  4. What is the “world,” as John uses the term?
  
  5. Give some concrete examples of each of the three sins mentioned in v. 16.
  
  6. Do you see any connection with the three-pronged “love of the world” and the devil’s temptation of Eve in Genesis 3?
  
  7. What does John mean when he says the world and its lust is “passing away”?
  
  8. Who “abides forever”? Does this mean it is impossible to fall away?
  
  9. How can we know the will of God for sure?

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# I John 1:5-2:29

## Antichrist and Christians (2:18-23)

John's statement of v. 17 that "the world is passing away" seems to trigger his next major thought, that, in this "last hour," those who are opposed to Christ are becoming more prominent; i.e., the "antichrists" are coming.

These "antichrists" came out from the church—they were indistinguishable from true, faithful Christians at first. But they did eventually manifest themselves and it was shown that they were not "of us" (v.19).

Who are these "antichrists"? Those who deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Denying the Son is parallel to denying the Father. Only he who "acknowledges" (confesses) the Son has the Father (Jn.1:18;5:23;15:23).

The Christians to whom John was writing knew how to discern between the truth and a lie — they know how to distinguish false teachers from true because they had "an anointing from the Holy One" which permitted them to "know all things."

## Word Studies: "antichrist," "anointing," "last hour"

"Antichrist" (Gk., *antichristo*). See 2:18, 22; 4:3; II Jn. 7. The term was applied specifically to those who denied Christ's incarnation. It has also been used to describe others who are enemies of Christ — those who would try to deceive the elect (Mt. 24:24; Mk. 13:22) or the "man of lawlessness" (II Th. 2:3, 8, 9) or the "beast" in the book of Revelation. Speculation about the identity of the antichrist has included Caligula or Nero, by the early church, and the Pope by leaders in the Reformation movement. It is all speculation, however.

"anointing" is the practice of applying oil to persons or things. Cf. Gen. 28:18; I Kings 19:16; Isa. 61:1. The word "Messiah" means "Anointed One." In the NT, Christ is called the "Anointed of God" (*chrio*) in Lk. 4:18; Acts 4:27; 10:38 and Hb. 1:9. The word *Christos* means "His Anointed," corresponding to "Messiah." Anointing with oil set a person or object apart, devoted for divine service. John uses the term figuratively, roughly corresponding with Paul's use of the term "sanctified," which also means to "set apart" (cf. I Cor. 1:2; 6:11; see Jn. 17:17).

"last hour" (Gk., *eschatos*) is the equivalent to the "last days" in Hb. 1:2; Jude 18 ("the last time"). In I Cor. 15:45, Paul says that with Christ came the beginning of the final age (cf. I Pet. 1:20). Some passages that use "the last days" may be referring to the time before the destruction of Jerusalem, but that isn't possible in John's letters, since they were written at least twenty years after that event.

2:18-23 Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. 20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know. 21 I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth. 22 Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. 23 Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.

KEY THOUGHT: Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?

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## Questions

1. What does “little children” (v 18) mean in this context?
2. What does John mean by “the last hour”?
3. What is the difference between “Antichrist” and many “antichrists”?
4. Does v. 19 teach the doctrine of “impossibility of apostasy” (perseverance of the saints)?
5. What is the “anointing from the Holy One”? When and how is it administered?
6. If John’s readers “know the truth” (v. 21) and “know all things” (v. 20) why was he writing at all?
7. What does it mean to “acknowledge the Son”?

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# I John 1:5-2:29

## The Power of the Abiding Word (2:24-29)

John continues his discussion of the antichrists in this section but now turns to the believer and says, “As for you...” (NASB95). In other words, you, the true believer, do something that the antichrist refuses to do — “let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning.” (v. 24; cf. 2:8). He says that if what you heard from the beginning (i.e., the gospel) abides in you then you abide (“dwell,” “continue,” “tarry,” “remain,” “endure”) in the Son and the Father (see 3:24; 4:15-16; Jn. 8:31).

Verse 25 seems to answer the question “What is the value of abiding in God?” John says the value is in the promise of eternal life (see 5:11-14; Jn. 17:3). Remember that “eternal life” another way of describing our relationship with God. It is more than a description of the duration of life in heaven.

The reason for writing this part of the letter is again reiterated by John — he writes concerning the antichrists and they are the ones who try to deceive you. Paul talked about the same type of false teachers in I Tim. 4:1-3. When John uses the term “antichrist” he is emphasizing the spiritual, or theological, aspect of these false teachers; now he is bringing out the practical aspect —that these “antichrists” attempt to deceive in order to lead men astray.

They will not succeed, however, because you are equipped to repel these deceivers. How? Through the anointing you have received, through which you know all things. I Cor 12:8ff. tells us that one of the spiritual gifts imparted by the apostles was the gift of “discerning spirits.” John may be referring to that gift here: that there were those in the church to which John was writing that had this gift and should use it to “test the spirits”(I Jn. 4:1) “whether they are of God.” The subject of “abiding” comes up again in vs. 28. This verse amplifies vs. 25: the promise of eternal life yields to confidence in the Day of Judgment. It also causes one to practice righteousness and “purify himself”(see 3:3).

2:24-29 As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. 25 This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life. 26 These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you. 27 As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him. 28 Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. 29 If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.

KEY THOUGHT: Abide in Christ by practicing righteousness

## Word Study: “righteous”

“righteous” (Gk., dikaios), “righteousness” (Gk., dikaiosune). Generally, something is “righteous” if it conforms to divine law or will and is free from guilt or sin. “Righteousness” is the moral quality or the act, or practice, doing right. “Righteous” is used five times in I John: 1:9 (KJV, “just”), 2:1, 29; 3:7, 12. “Righteousness” is used 3 times: 2:29; 3:7, 10.

## Questions

1. Describe the nature of “eternal life.” Do we have it now?
2. What is the “anointing”? Do you have it?
3. What is the value of abiding in Christ?

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# I John 3:1-15

## Children of God

“What manner of love...!” It is a matter totally inexpressible, completely incomprehensible and yet absolutely true that God loves so much that He calls us His “children.” In fact, God has arranged things so that we have a right to be called His children, if we will believe (Jn. 1:12-13). God indeed is LOVE.

John here parades before us the whole Christian experience: we are called children of God. When Christ comes, we’ll be like Him and will see Him as He is (v. 2). In the meantime, we purify ourselves, just as He is pure (v.3). Our present and future in God’s hands!

John, in describing our state, also offers us a way to test ourselves. One way to know whether you are truly a child of God is to ask how the world views you. Does the world claim you as one of its own? (v. 1; Cf. Jas 4:4; 1 Jn. 2:15-17). Is it true that the world “does not know you”? What does it mean to say the world “does not know” us? Just look at the way the world treated Jesus. They knew Him—they knew who He was; they knew his family, his hometown and could talk to him. But they didn’t ever know Him by experience (see word study) because they didn’t take the time to know Him. With very few exceptions, Jesus was so unlike the world that He condemned it by His very presence. So the world hated Him. If it hated Him, why not us? See v. 13; Jn. 15:18-19.

John gives us another test: what different is your hope making in your life? Those who truly hope in Christ are busy purifying themselves (v.3). Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8). Only the pure in heart will see God and only those who hope to see God will purify themselves.

Talking about purifying oneself naturally leads to a discussion of sin because sin is what purifying is meant to remove. What is sin? Sin is lawlessness. It is a violation of God’s law. John says there are only two ways to live a life: one is either purifying himself in anticipation of the Lord’s return or he is practicing lawlessness (sin). “Everyone” either purifies himself or practices sin.

Since Jesus appeared for the purpose of taking away our sins, those who abide in Him cannot practice sin (v.5). It is illogical to believe that one for whom Christ died would desire to engage in sin. “No one who abides in Him sins...the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous” (vv. 6-7). Practicing sin puts you in the realm of the devil and despises the work of Christ (v. 8). “No one who is born of God practices sin...” (v. 9).

Can John possibly be saying that Christians do not sin? Yes and no. There are three senses in which it can be said that one who is born of God “does not sin.” First, she does not practice sin—sin is not a part of her custom, habit or routine. Second, she never accepts sin as an inevitable or necessary component in her life. She refuses to provide sin a place to rest in her heart. She is not willing to sin and even one sin is repugnant to her (cf. Jas. 2:10). She never makes an excuse for sin. For example, she never says “that’s just the way I am.” Third, as long as she has her eyes focused on Christ, she knows she will not sin (unless her conscience becomes seared

3:1-15 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and *such* we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. 4 Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. 7 Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; 8 the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. 9 No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. 10 By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. 11 For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; 12 not as Cain, *who* was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous. 13 Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. 15 Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

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over, which is a product of the practice of sin). So she arranges her life in such a way that makes it easy to keep Christ in front of her at all times.

Of course, everyone who is in the body sins from time to time. To deny it is to make one a liar (1:8). So, yes, sin is still a factor, temptations must be met and confession must be a on-going activity (I Jn. 1:9). But sin does not rule the life of those who are born of God (see Rom. 6:14). Sin rules the live of those who belong to the devil (v. 8, 10).

John provides another test of birth: Do you love the brethren? (v.11-15). Love of the brethren is a message inherent in the gospel and heard “from the beginning.” The Greek word John uses for brother is adelphos (philadelphos = love of the brethren; phileo + adelphos). Thayer defines adelphos generally as “from the same womb.” Also, “a fellow believer, united to another by bonds of affection; a single family.” See 1 Pet 3:8 and Rom 12:10. We love each other because we have the same “birth,” and the same “parents” and are headed for the same “home.” Do we love each other like we love a beloved member of our own family?

John sets up a contrast in v. 13-15. He says that we should not be surprised if the world hates us (see word study on “hate”); in fact, we can expect it. But we love those whom the world hates and in this (love) we know we have passed from death to life. If we do not love the brethren, we have not (and will not)”cross over” from the realm of (spiritual) death to (spiritual) life. In fact, we are murderers! (v.15). Hating your brother is simply not an acceptable attitude under the gospel of Christ. Remember, Christ told us to love our enemies (Mt 5:44) – how much more the brethren!! Peter adds that it must be sincere in I Pet 1:22-23. He says “Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.”

Verses 12-13 tells us the source of most hatred. Mark Twain said “there is nothing more annoying than a good example.” The quickest way to engender the hate of the world is to “be good.” Being percieved as “good” can be a disadvantage in our society. For example, actors and actresses will often attempt to dispel any notion that they are “too good.” This is not humility, but a shrewd career move.

If you cannot understand why people in the world don’t want to have much to do with you, look no further than the kind of life you are leading – it condemns them and they know it! You’re righteousness causes their unrighteousness to stand out in bold relief. Noah condemned the world through his righteousness (Hb. 11:7), not by wagging his finger in their faces, but by living an exemplary lifestyle. The better example you are the worse they become in their own comparison. And so John says: “Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you.” To turn the lesson around, if you do not feel that the world hates you, perhaps you should examine your life.

John is concerned primarily with love of the brethren. And the truth is that the source of hate is the same among brethren. Cain hated Abel – why? Because Abel did right and Cain couldn’t stand it! His jealousy caused him to murder is own brother. A person in the church who does not love the brethren is a friend of the world and murderer.

KEY THOUGHT: Children of God purify themselves, just as He is pure

### Word Study: “children,” “know,” “pure,” “hate”

“children” (Gk., teknon) a child in relation to father and mother. Figuratively, in John, as those “begotten of God.”

“know” (Gk., ginosko) to know by experience, to perceive through the senses. Coming to know through first-hand experience. Contrasts with oida, to know by observation or intellectually (be careful of making too much of differences in Greek words; such distinctions don’t always hold up on further analysis. Sometimes, different words are used for stylistic reasons).

“pure” (Gk., hagnos), unadulterated, unmixed, free from moral or spiritual defilement. Free from sin.

“hate” (Gk., miso), Vines: “malicious and unjustifiable feelings toward others whether toward the innocent or by mutual animosity.” Arndt & Gingrich say it means to persecute in hatred, detest. This is world’s attitude toward Christians.

### Questions

1. Who are “children of God”? How do we become “born of Him”?
2. What is involved in purifying ourselves (v. 3)?

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3. What is sin? Elaborate.
  4. Why did Jesus come to earth?
  5. Do Christians sin?
  6. What does it mean to “abide”?
  7. Who is “righteous”?
  8. What is “His seed” (v. 9)?
  9. Describe the children of the devil.
  10. Why did Cain kill Abel?
  11. We pass from what death to what life (v.14)?
  12. Is there a mid-point between “love of the brethren” and “hate”?

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# I John 3:16-24

There is an interesting contrast here between “murderers,” those who hate their brothers, and the “murder” of Christ, which exemplifies love. Cain hated and murdered his brother (v. 12); Christ loved and was murdered for His friends (cf. Jn. 15:12, 13). John says, “We know love by this.” Therefore, we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. John probably has those who “went out” from them (2:19) in mind, as they clearly demonstrated their lack of love for the brethren by choosing against Christ.

But John says that the real acid test is not in the willingness to lay down our lives for the brethren, but in something much more probable: sharing our goods. If we refuse to share with a brother who is in need, how far we are from the love of God! (v.17) There is a difference between theory and action; in duty and dogma. The real sermon is not the one we preach on the street corners or in the pulpit, but the one we live out in our daily lives for all to see. Our actions must always match our words (v.18). We must “walk the talk.”

It is when we help our brethren who are in need that we know we are “of the truth” (v. 19). To be “of the truth” is similar to being “in the light,” “of Christ,” or “in Him.” The concrete act of helping those in need will “assure our heart before Him.” Christians often wrestle with doubts about their eternal condition, yet are unwilling to get involved in helping others. John is pretty clear: helping others, which is evidence of love, will provide an added benefit of cleansing your conscience.

Your heart, the moral judge, will “condemn” you when you fail to love as you should (v. 20; I prefer the reading of the NKJV, “For if our heart condemns us”). However, your honest efforts to help those who are in need will provide peace when you remember that God is “greater than your heart” (which condemns you). The implication is that God will not condemn those who are honestly seeking to practice love because He knows that your “heart is right.”

Whether our hearts do condemn us (because of our failure to perfectly practice the love command) or our hearts do not condemn us (because we honestly feel we are doing what we can), then we can have confidence before God. This is not unconditional, of course. But it does suggest that we can know that we are righteous (cf. v. 7)—i.e., that we are keeping the commandments.

If we approach God in confidence, keep His commandments and do what is pleasing to God He answers our prayers. There is no promised of answered prayer to those who are unwilling to serve the Lord with all their hearts and minds. Yet, most folks say they “pray.”

In these verses (18-24), we see John’s “triple play” in action. Christians meet three tests: (1) the social test; we are to love the brethren; (2) the doctrinal test; we must believe Jesus in the name of Jesus Christ; and (3) the moral test; we must keep the commandments. Which commandments are we to keep? Here, John emphasizes the love and belief commandments. Taken with previous statements, though, John is including all commandments, since violation of God’s commands are sin (see vv. 4-10). How do we know if God is abiding in us? John says we know by “the Spirit whom he has given us.” The Spirit, working through the word of God, tells us what God desires from us. When we keep that will, God abides in us. Compare Paul’s statement in Romans 8:16.

What Some of the Commentators Say on 3:19-20

R.C.H.LENSKI

3:16-24 We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. 19 We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him 20 in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. 23 This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. 24 The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

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Translation — In connection with this we shall all know that we are from the truth and shall persuade our hearts before him, if in regard to anything the heart condemns us, that God is greater than our heart and knows everything.  
Commentary — “To be sure, he knows all our failures in love, all that our own heart finds against us; but he knows vastly more, namely all about our real spiritual state, that the measure of love we do have shows that we have stepped over from the death into the life(v.14), that although we are as yet imperfect in love, and our own hearts penitently acknowledge it, we have been born from him and are his children.. .after we have tried to live up to v. 16-18, our hearts bring accusations against us, and then the question arises: How shall we recognize that we are from the truth, persuade ourselves in God’s presence? John has shown how the condemnation of our hearts is to be answered and silenced.

#### GUY N WOODS

Translation—Hereby shall we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before him: Because if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.

Commentary —“...the knowledge of the reality of the love for others enables us to quiet the fears which arise in our own hearts and restrain the questionings which confront us from imagined deficiencies of life and conduct. If, in spite of the assurances provided, we yet suffer the uneasiness which springs from the realization of our own weaknesses and the consciousness of our own imperfections, let us remember that God is greater than our heart...”

#### B.F. WESTCOTT

Translation — In this we shall know we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him, whereinsoever our heart may condemn us; because God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things.

Commentary —“The sense within us of a sincere love of the brethren, which is the sign of God’s presence with us, will enable us to stay the accusations of our conscience, whatever they may be, because God, who gives us the love, and so blesses us with His fellowship, is greater than our heart; and He, having perfect knowledge, forgives all on which the heart sadly dwells.”

#### WILLIAM BARCLAY

Translation —By this we know we are of the truth, and by this we will reassure our heart before him, when our heart condemns us in anything, for God is greater than our hearts and knows all things.

Commentary —“Into the human heart there are bound to come doubts.. .our hearts condemn us — that is inevitable. But God is greater than our hearts; he knows all things. Not only does he know our sins; he knows our love, our longings, the nobility that never fully works itself out, our penitence; ... it is this very knowledge of God which gives us hope...God knows the heart (I Kings 8:18)”

#### JOHN R.W. STOTT

Commentary —“However firmly grounded the Christian’s assurance is, his heart may sometimes need reassurance. the suggestion seems to be that it may not be either and unusual or infrequent experience for the Christian’s serene assurance to be disturbed. Sometimes the accusations of our ‘conscience’ will be true... sometimes false. In either case the inner voice is not to overcome us.”

**Word Study: “confidence”**

(Gk., *parresia*) — boldness (Acts 4:13; Eph. 3:12; 6:19; Hb. 10:19), confidence (Hb. 3:6; 10:35; I Jn. 2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14). A feeling of assurance.

**Questions**

1. Who is a murderer, according to John? Where did Jesus say almost the same thing?
2. How do we “know love”? What are we to do?
3. What is the “acid test” of love?
4. Write out the explanation of vv. 19-21. What kind of encouragement does the passage offer?
5. For whom does God answer prayer? Cf. Isa. 59:1-2.
6. How do we know that God “abides” in us?

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# I John 4:1-6

## The Rival Spirits of Truth and Error

This section corresponds closely with 2:18-29 and contains three main thoughts:

1. There are many spiritual influences at work, realized through men: “false prophets” (v. 1). On false prophets, see Mt. 7:15; II Pet. 2:1.
2. The test of spirits (in this context) lies in their witness to the incarnation (vv. 2, 3).
3. The test of men lies in the recognition of the truth (vv. 4, 5)

The reason that the “witness to the incarnation” is a test is because the false prophets, in this text, are Gnostics who taught that the body was inherently evil. On that basis, they were denying the incarnation of Christ. John answers this specifically in 4:2-3.

Seven times John uses the term “of God”(ek tou Theou). This term refers to the source of the teaching. It can be translated “from God” and is opposed to that which is “from” or has its source in the world.

KEY THOUGHT: Test the Spirits

## Questions

1. How does John say we are to “test” the spirits?
2. To what extent can we apply this test today?
3. Who is “he who is in the world”(v.4)?
4. How do we know the spirit of truth and error (v.6)?

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# I John 4:7-16

## Love—The Ultimate Test

From the doctrinal test of 4:1-6, John turns to the social test: the word “love” is used 27 times from v. 7 to the end of chapter 4. There is not a chapter in the New Testament that uses the word more than this (including I Corinthians 13).

In verses 7-8, John repeats the test of sonship that he talked about in 3:10ff. If God lives in you, you will love your brother. Love is the supreme test of Christianity. But is John saying that all of those who “love” are therefore “born of God” (i.e., Christians)? Can the Buddhist who exhibits love be “born of God”? No, John is speaking to those who claim to be Christians and telling them that the test of true sonship is love of the brethren. Those who claim to love God but do not love their brethren are not truly “born of God.”

God, of course, demonstrated the ideal of love in the giving of His Son (v. 9-10) so that we can have life in Him. This, John says, is the epitome of love because the gift of Christ came from a perfectly pure God who offered His Son for the purpose of “propitiating” Himself (see the word study below). God did not exercise His right to destroy us, but instead gave us the most precious He had to give. The application? If God loves us like that we ought to love our brothers (v. 11).

“I sought for God, but God I could not see. I sought my soul, but it eluded me. I sought my brother, and found all three.” Though we cannot see God, God can live in us. How? By His Spirit that He has given us. We are led by the Spirit (Rom. 8:14) and the Spirit testifies with our spirit that God lives in us (v. 13-14; cf. Rom. 8:16). How does the Spirit tell us that we abide in God? It is through the Spirit’s testimony, revealed in the word of God, that we know that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. It is the same Spirit who tells us that when we love our brothers, love is perfected in us (cf. Mt. 5:48). Review 3:17-18 to see how love for our brethren is demonstrated in practical terms.

In Colossians, Paul says “put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity” (3:14). In the same context, he says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...the word dwells in us just like the Spirit dwells in us and just like God abides in us and we in Him: through our devotion to Him demonstrated in the keeping of His commandments (Jn. 14:15).

That Spirit given to us causes us to confess that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 15; cf. I Cor. 12:3). There is no way to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God or that He is the Savior of the world or that He is the Lord except through the testimony of the Spirit. It is by the Spirit’s witness that we live in God and He in us and that we have come to know the love He has for us (v. 16).

4:7-16 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. 14 We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son *to be* the Savior of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

KEY THOUGHT: God is love. Love like God.

## Word Study: “propitiation,” “perfected”

“Propitiation” from the Greek *hilaskomai*, *hilasterion* and *hilasmos* (Hb. 2:17; Rom. 3:25; I Jn. 2:2; 4:10) and the Latin *propitius*, “favorable.” The term is borrowed from the Greek idea of using sacrifices to satisfy the gods. Jesus Christ is the ultimate sacrifice that satisfies God’s wrath and is therefore the “propitiation” for our sins. See Isa. 53:10; Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34; Jn. 10:17-18; Rom. 1:18, 24, 26, 28; 3:25. “Perfected” (Gk., *teleioo*) to bring to completion, to bring to the goal, to “perfect” (cf. I Jn. 2:5).

## Questions

1. How do you define love (agape)?

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2. How is God love (v. 8)? What else do the Scriptures say “God is \_\_\_\_\_”?
  3. In what person has love been most perfectly demonstrated? How?
  4. What is “propitiation”?
  5. What do the words “perfect” or “perfected” mean?
  6. How does the Spirit dwell within you? Does God? Christ?
  7. How would you describe the Spirit’s work with word of God: Does it supplement the work of the Holy Spirit or is it the instrument through which it works?
  8. Using a concordance, list any activity you can find that the Holy Spirit does that pertains to the conviction and conversion of sinners that the Scriptures do not do.
  9. If the Holy Spirit is personally active in our lives, apart from the word of God, state what the Scriptures teach about the purpose of that activity.

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# I John 4:17-21

## Confidence in God's Love

“Confidence in the day of judgment” (v. 17) is a product of God abiding in us that, in turn, is a product of God’s love in us and our love for the brethren and belief in Christ (v. 15-16). Love, then, has a goal: to give us confidence in the Day of Judgment. We can have such assurance when we are seek to be like God in our love for others (cf. Mt. 5:48).

The opposite of “confidence in the day of judgment” is fear (in the day of judgment). God’s love in us is perfected (reaches its goal) when there is no fear. Perfect (perfected, completed, mature) love casts out (ballei, to drive out) fear. “Casts out” is present active indicative in the Greek, meaning that that love continues to cast out fear; it’s an on-going process: “perfected love keeps casting out our fears.” When we are cognizant of God’s love for us and are practicing love for our brothers, there is no room for fear of punishment. Love is “perfected” in us.

The rationale for our love of our brothers is God’s love that was first shown to us (v. 19). Verse 10 explains when and how that love was “first” shown us: at the cross, in His Son. Some versions add “Him” in v. 19, but there is little textual authority for it. The point is that we love (period!) because we see perfect love in God. Without God’s act, we don’t have a perfect definition of love. This is a partial explanation of why Jesus called “love” a new commandment in John 13:34-35. While love had been commanded in the Old Testament (Lev. 19:15), the world had never seen the likes of love like that demonstrated at the cross.

John again says that it is not possible to truly love God while you hate your brother. It may be easy to proclaim love for a God who you do not deal with in tangible ways and who has no needs. But it is meaningless if that love does not produce in you a desire to help your brother who you do have contact with and has needs. If you hate your brother, your alleged love for God is only an abstract thing which has no fruit in daily life.

4:17-21 By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. 19 We love, because He first loved us. 20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

KEY THOUGHT: Perfect love casts out fear

## Questions

1. Describe how and when love is “perfected” in us.
2. What will give us confidence in the Day of Judgment?
3. What is the rationale behind our love for others?
4. How is our love for God proven?

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# I John 5:1-12

## The Power of the Christian Life: Faith and Witness

We can divide this section into two paragraphs. We might entitle the first (vv. 1-5) “The Victory of Faith” and the second (vv. 6-12) “The Divine Witness.” Remember that John is writing to believers during a time when the Gnostics (specifically, the Docetists) were teaching that Jesus did not come in the flesh. John says that those who deny the incarnation cannot be “born of God.” The Gnostic not only claimed to be born of God, but claimed he was the only one who was born of God. It is not John’s purpose to provide a complete theology of the “new birth” but to deny new birth status to those who reject the fleshly Jesus.

Gnosticism also created a pecking order in the kingdom, and John rejects that by saying that those who claim to love the Father love the brethren (“the child born of Him”), too. And how do you know if you love the brethren? Keep the commandments, especially the commandments to love each other (3:23; 4:7). This is the love of God (vv. 2-3). Those who claimed that acts done in the body had no spiritual impact were condemned by John’s words. He says that those who love God keep His commandments and that His commandments (for those who love God) are not burdensome. It is never a burden to do loving acts for one you truly love; it is a joy.

John says our faith (the noun, *pistis*, occurs only here in the letters and the gospel of John), which he connects with the love of God, the keeping of commandments and our new birth, overcomes the world and gives us a victory in the world. Though we live in the world, we are not of the world; our faith in Christ helps us overcome the challenges to godliness that the world presents. “Has overcome” is an aorist in the Greek. An aorist is the “point action” tense; that means that John is talking about something that happened once in the past. Our faith in Jesus has enabled us to share in the victory over the world that has already been won by Christ. As long as we are in Christ, we “overcome the world” through faith in Him (v. 5).

Verse 6 looks at this from a different perspective, turning our eyes to the Lord Himself and pointing to the Holy Spirit as a divine witness. Jesus came by water in that He was baptized at the beginning of His public ministry, when the Spirit descended upon Him. He came by blood in that He completed His mission on the cross. The followers of Cerinthus taught that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at His baptism but left Him before His death. So John emphasizes that it was not only by water but by water and the blood that Jesus came. These two testify about the same Jesus. When the Spirit bears witness you know it is true! (See Matt 3:15,17; Jn. 1:34).

There is considerable controversy over the translation of vv. 7-8. We won’t go into those issues here other than to say the translation of the King James Version is probably not correct. The following words are found in only four late manuscripts: “. . . in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth. . .” The best manuscripts translate vv. 7 & 8 thus (see NASB):

“For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.”

This is supposed to be one of the most difficult passages of scripture in the NT but when the prejudice against baptism is removed, there is no problem seeing what John means. Note that the three “agree,” that is, they converge upon one central point—the one gospel of Jesus Christ who came in the flesh. The person of the Spirit testifies as

5:1-12 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. 4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. 5 Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? 6 This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. 7 For there are three that testify: 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. 9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son. 10 The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. 11 And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.

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does the act of His baptism and the fact of His death on the cross. R.C.H. Lenski, a Lutheran scholar, says: “The baptism of Jesus speaks volumes about His deity and His entire mission... (His) death does the same.”

John goes on to consider the effectiveness of the witness. It is a divine witness (v.9). We often receive the witness of men, as we should; but the witness of God is infinitely greater—it is only logical that we should receive His testimony. The testimony that Jesus came to earth and died in the flesh is from God: to disbelieve it is to call God a liar! Furthermore, our eternal salvation is bound up in the truth of that testimony. Eternal life is in the Son. Therefore, only those who believe in the Son have eternal life “in them” (v.9-12; cf. John 14:6).

KEY THOUGHT: Faith in Christ is our victory!

### Questions

1. Is John saying that believing in Jesus is all that is required to be “born of God”? Why or why not?
2. What is the connection between loving our brethren and observing God’s commandments?
3. How does faith “overcome” the world? What is the “world” in John’s writings?
4. Describe the “water” and “blood” in v. 5-8.
5. To what has God “testified” concerning His Son?
6. How do we “have” the Son of God (v. 12)?

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# I John 5:13-21

## Things We Know

John says that he wrote this letter for the express purpose of giving believers assurance of eternal life (v. 13). He has given believers three “tests” (doctrinal, social and moral) to check our spiritual progress, and through these we can know that we are headed in the right direction. There is no assurance here for one who is not willing to take these tests seriously. But for those whose hearts are right, you can know you have eternal life.

Here is confidence—that we can pray and know that God hears our prayers, if we ask according to His will (v. 14). That means that we ask according to God’s teachings on prayer and that we ask while doing our best to keep His commandments in mind (cf. 3:22). We know also that if He hears us, then we will have what we ask — God will answer our prayers, though not always in the way we think best. One aspect of asking according to God’s will is to seek His will, not our own (see Mt 26:39; 7:7-11; Phil 4:6-7).

Among the prayers we are to offer are those on behalf of our brethren (v 16). If we see a brother sin and that sin is not a “sin unto death,” we can pray effectively for him that he might have life. Perhaps this means that God will provide opportunities for him to escape the temptations that lead to this sin (cf. I Cor. 10:13). But if the sin is “unto death,” John says that such a prayer is not effective.

What is “a sin unto death” (“leading” is not in the original). Views that categorize sins into “venial” and “mortal” can be discarded, since the Bible makes no such distinction. John says that there are sins that are “to death” — the result of these sins is spiritual death. It is very unlikely that John is discussing physical death here. Everyone dies physically, whether they sin or not (i.e., a child dies, but a child is not a sinner).

A Calvinist will have difficulty explaining how a “brother” in Christ could sin a sin leading to spiritual death since that is the same as saying he has “fallen away.” Their answer that he “was never really a Christian” is speculation. Some interpretations are based on an improper view of Mt 12:31ff. and say the “sin unto death” is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. But that too begs the question, since “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” is left unexplained (my personal view is that the sin against the Holy Spirit was confined to the time when Jesus walked the earth and did miracles; the context in Mt. 12 suggests that it involved ascribing the actual work of Christ to Satan).

If these interpretations are incorrect, what’s left? There are two views that correspond best with both the context of I John and the rest of the New Testament. One possibility connects this verse with 1:7: The sin leading to death is sin which amounts to walking in darkness. Therefore, the brother is out of the “light,” and out of reach of the cleansing blood of Christ. Praying for one who is not walking in the light is not worthwhile.

A second view connects this verse with 1:9: Since God will forgive every sin that a brother confesses, but 5:16 says there is a sin that God will not forgive (implied in “to death”). The “sin to death” must be sin that the brother refuses to confess. That sin is “unto death”(see Lk 13:3). There is no point in praying for a brother who will not confess his own sin.

Both of these views share the advantage of considering the whole context of I John as well as the immediate context which concerns prayer—i.e., should I pray for this brother? The first requires that we make some decision as to whether or not a brother or sister is still “walking in the light.” I have trouble believing that John was promoting such a subjective view of things. I believe, therefore, that the latter view has more to commend it. We can know whether a brother is willing to confess his sin simply by asking him.

5:13-21 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us *in* whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him. 16 If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not *leading* to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is a sin *leading* to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. 17 All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not *leading* to death. 18 We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. 19 We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in *the power* of the evil one. 20 And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. 21 Little children, guard yourselves from idols.

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Of course, if one is willing to confess his sins, then God will forgive them (1:9). Our duty is not only to pray for such a one but to go to him if we feel he is sinning and help him (see Jas. 5:20). V. 17 reminds us that all unrighteousness is sin but all sin does not lead to our spiritual death if we are willing to “confess our sins”(1:9). Confessing sin is both specific (confessing known sin) and general (confessing our sins of ignorance and shortcomings). It is something we can do simply by talking to God in prayer.

Here’s something else we know (v. 18)—if we are born of God, we do not *practice* sin (see 3:9). On the contrary, we avoid sin and find it unattractive, knowing it is an abomination to God (see Rom 2:4; Heb 12:1-2; Eph 6:11 etc.). 5:19 says the whole world lies in the arms of the devil because the world has chosen to be there. But Christians have chosen to place themselves in the care of the Father. So the evil one cannot “touch” him (i.e., take him captive without his consent). The coming of the Son of God has given us knowledge of the truth, the perfect insulation against error (v. 20).

John offers a final exhortation in v. 21: as long as we are on the earth, we have work to do: “guard yourselves from idols.” Idols, by definition, are substitutes for the true God (v. 21). They usurp His rightful place in our lives. Anything can be an idol—it can be metal or mental. If we “guard ourselves” God will do the rest.

KEY THOUGHT: You can know that you have eternal life

### Questions

1. What does it mean to “believe on the name of the Son of God”?
2. Does knowing you have eternal life mean you can never lose it, no matter what you do?
3. Explain the confidence we get from God answering our prayers.
4. For whom should we pray? Who does John tell us not to pray for?
5. What is a sin “leading to death”?
6. What should be our view of the world? Who seems to control it?
7. How can we know God and therefore overcome the wicked one?
8. What are idols? Name some common ones in 20th century America.