

If We Walk in the Light (1 John 1)

Expository Lessons from the First Letter of John

I. Intro to the First Letter of John

- i. Why we are studying this letter now.
 - 1. We asked our house church group for ideas of next books we wanted to explore in our Sunday lessons; this was one idea (of many).
 - 2. One of the reasons many wanted to study this letter: its focus on love, especially loving one another.
 - 3. However, there are a lot of other things John speaks of in this letter; we hope to cover whatever we find in this letter, in the order the topics appear.
- b. **Questions:** Why was this letter written? What are the major themes in it?
 - i. Let's ask that question of the text as we are going through this letter, and hopefully find the answers.
 - ii. First, try to discern what is on the author's mind; what were the problems *he* was confronting.
 - 1. We will first *ask this question of John directly*, rather than just relying on modern commentaries.
 - 2. In *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*, by M. Adler and C. Van Doren, the authors made the case for "active reading".
 - a. If you attend a lecture by a famous speaker or have a conversation, if you have a question you can simply ask that person.
 - b. However, when you are reading a book (especially when the author has been dead for a long time!), when you ask the author the questions, you are the one who must do the work of finding the answers, yourself!
 - c. Active reading is hard work, but it makes all the difference in the world in terms of what you are able to get out of a great author's writings!

- iii. After we appreciate the objective of the author and his primary intended audience, we will be in a better position to assess how points made in these letters may apply to us, today.
- c. **Questions:** What happened to the apostle John? Following the events associated with John that we have in the gospel of John and the book of Acts, what became of the apostle John? Where did he go, and how did his life end?
 - i. At the end of our series on gospel of John we addressed available historical accounts of the fate of Joseph of Arimathea, Thomas and Peter. Ironically, there is one person whose fate we never explored in that class. *What ever happened to the apostle John?* Let's consider that now.
 - ii. Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea and early Christian historian, writing c. 325 AD in *Ecclesiastical History*:
 - 1. "In this persecution (*referring to the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire under emperor Domitian -CP*), it is handed down by tradition that the apostle and evangelist John, who was yet living, in consequence of his testimony to the divine word, was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos.
 - 2. (*Referring to the accounts of pagan historians who were hostile to the Christians*) "...these also have accurately noted the time, for it happened, according to them, in the 15th year of Domitian." (*That would correspond to about 95-96 AD; in which case John the apostle could have been in his late seventies. -CP*)
 - 3. "...but after Domitian had reigned 15 years, and Nerva succeeded to the government, the Roman Senate decreed that the honors of Domitian should be revoked, and that those who had been unjustly expelled to return to their homes, and have their goods restored. This is the statement of the historians of the day. It was then also, that the apostle John returned from his banishment in Patmos and took up his abode in Ephesus (*in modern-day Turkey -CP*), according to the ancient tradition of the church."
 - a. (Source: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, chapters 18 and 20)
 - 4. Eusebius also cites Polycrates, a bishop of the church in Ephesus, who had written that the *apostle John died and was buried in Ephesus.* (*Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, chapter 31)
 - iii. Regarding the authorship of **First Letter of John**.

1. Eusebius said that while there was some question in his day among some regarding the authorship of **Revelation** and **2 & 3 John** (letters), everyone agreed that the apostle John was the author of **Gospel of John** and **1 John**.
 - a. “But besides the gospel of John, his first epistle is acknowledged without dispute, both by those of the present day, and also by the ancients.”
 - i. (Source: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, chapter 24)
- d. Consider the old age of John, based on what Eusebius wrote.
 - i. Eusebius makes the point that John lived longer than the other apostles.
 - ii. Let’s consider how old John must have been at the end of his life.
 1. If John was exiled to the island of Patmos in the year 96 AD (twenty-six years after the destruction of Jerusalem), and
 2. Jesus was crucified c. 33 AD, and
 3. John was either a teen-ager or in his early 20’s when Jesus was crucified;
 4. Then John likely would have been in his eighties when he was exiled to Patmos.
 5. Also, he lived for some time after his exile before he died in Ephesus. Clearly, John would have been an old man at the time of his death!

II. That Which was from the Beginning (Read **1 John 1:1-4**)

- a. You may notice some phrases and references here and in the rest of this letter, that are strikingly similar to what we saw in the gospel of **John**.
- b. “That which was *from the beginning...concerning the Word of life...*” (**1 John 1:1**)
 - i. Introductory words remind me of how the gospel of John begins.
 1. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (**John 1:1**, NKJV)
- c. “Which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled...” (**1 John 1:1**)

- i. Perhaps this is a reference to the incarnation (that Jesus, the Son of God, really did become flesh and blood, in contradiction to what Gnostic-type people may have been saying at the time).
 1. In that light, consider the statement in **1 John 4:1-3** regarding those who do not believe that Jesus came in the flesh.
- ii. This statement in **1 John 1** about “which...our hands have handled” also reminds me of the account of Jesus appearing to the doubting Thomas, near the end of the gospel of **John**.
 1. “...So he said to them, ‘Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.’ And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, ‘Peace to you!’ Then He said to Thomas, ‘Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.’” (**John 20:25-27**, NKJV)
 2. This was also a problem that Paul addressed to the church in Corinth, in **1 Corinthians 15**, where apparently some were doubting the physical resurrection of the body.
 - a. There, Paul makes the case that the entire Christian faith hangs on the truth of the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. (See **1 Corinthians 15:12-19**.)
 3. Recently I had an interesting discussion related to this subject, with an old friend. He had been listening to a popular modern liberal ‘Christian’ writer who clearly has heavily influenced by New Age concepts.
 - a. This writer was saying that there were many ways to God (Jesus not being the only way).
 - b. Also, this popular false teacher claimed that Jesus only ‘spiritually rose’, as opposed physically (bodily) rising from the dead.
 4. Many today, over-reacting against very narrow and controlling religious groups that claim they are the only true Christians, the only ones who will be saved, swing toward the opposite extreme of universalism (that *all* will be saved in the end; *all spiritual roads* lead to salvation).
 - a. However, consider (in addition to the passage in **John 20** with Thomas) the following:

- i. “Now as they said these things, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, ‘Peace to you.’ But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit. And He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for *a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.*’ When He had said this, *He showed them His hands and His feet.* But while they still did not believe for joy, and marveled, He said to them, ‘Have you any food here?’ *So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And He took it and ate in their presence.*” (**Luke 24:36–43**, NKJV)
- b. Also, what about the empty tomb? Both the Jews and Christians agreed that the body of Jesus was gone, and the tomb was empty on the Sunday morning after the crucifixion. (**Matthew 28:1-15**).
 - i. All agree: there was *no body* in the tomb on Sunday morning. What happened to it?
 - ii. Either Jesus was bodily raised from the dead, as the apostles testified; or the Jesus and his apostles were frauds (with the apostles stealing the body and fabricating a false story).
 - iii. There is no logical way one can come to the conclusion that Jesus was simply one of many good spiritual teachers who can lead us down one of many paths, all of which lead to God.

III. If We Walk in the Light (Read **1 John 1:5-10**)

- a. Notice how many times the word “if” appears in this passage, indicating that what follows is based on a *conditional promise*.
 - i. “*If* we say we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness...”
 - ii. “*If* we walk in the light...”
 - iii. “*If* we say we have no sin...”
 - iv. “*If* we confess our sins...”
 - v. “*If* we say that we have not sinned...”
- b. Many of the most important promises throughout Scripture include *conditions*. In other words, “*If* we do X, God will do (something promised).”
- c. A very popular view held by many Protestants in the US, regarding our salvation, is that it is impossible for a Christian to lose his or her salvation. They claim that

when a person becomes a Christian, all their sins (past, present and future) have been forgiven unconditionally.

i.

1. The reasoning of those who hold to unconditional eternal security (sometimes referred to as “once saved, always saved”) generally goes something like the following:
 - a. Jesus, in dying on the cross for us, fully obtained pardon for all of our sins.
 - b. Since we had nothing to do with obtaining that pardon in the first place, they conclude that there is *nothing we can do to forfeit it, either*.
 - c. They see our salvation as something that has already been fully accomplished, already obtained by Jesus for us completely.
 - d. Since (they reason) our salvation has nothing to do with anything we do (our works), continued obedience to the teachings of Jesus *is not required*.

ii. Those who hold to “once saved, always saved” frequently point to promises made by Jesus such as in **John 10**, where Jesus said:

1. “And I give them eternal life, and *they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.*” (**John 10:28**, NKJV)
2. While it is true that no one can *snatch us out of* the hands of Jesus, what about if *we ourselves* decide to *jump out* of his hands?
 - a. **Example:** Imagine that you are in a large boat, on a voyage from Boston to London. You have been told that this ship is going to London; and that if you remain on the ship, you will make it to London.
 - i. What would happen if half-way across the Atlantic Ocean, you decided to jump off the back of the boat? Would you still make it to London?
 - ii. If you got drunk, dove off the back of the boat at night and ended up drowning, does that mean that the ship owner’s promise to you (that you would make it to London) was meaningless?
 1. Of course not. The promise included a condition: *IF you remain on the boat.*

2. We can be confident and secure if we remain on the boat; but we cannot become reckless and dive off the boat!
- iii. So, what happens *if we don't* continue to walk in the light?
1. John says that if Christians walk in darkness, we no longer have fellowship with Jesus.
 2. Paul addresses the same issue clearly and powerfully in **1 Corinthians 9:24-10:13**, where he explains how the exodus journey foreshadowed the Christian life.
 - a. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they (God's people in the Wilderness) *all*:
 - i. Were "baptized";
 - ii. Ate the spiritual food and drank the spiritual drink; and
 - iii. Drank from the rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ (therefore, they drank from Christ).
 - b. Clearly, Paul is not referring to non-Christians in this passage. Despite the fact that these people were baptized, and had been "drinking from Christ", *God was not pleased with most of them*. They fell in the Wilderness because they did not remain faithful to God; instead, they fell into specific sins. As a result, they never made it to the Promised Land (foreshadowing heaven, eternal life with the Lord, for us).
 - c. The *whole point* that Paul was making to the Corinthian Christians was that they would lose their salvation if they refuse to walk faithfully with the Lord to the end!
 - iv. As we see in **1 John 1**, we can have confidence in our salvation; however, that is *based on certain conditions* (*if* we walk in the light..., etc.)
 1. If we do not continue to walk in the light, the blood of Christ *will not* continue to cleanse us of our sins!
 2. Yes, someone who becomes a Christian can lose their salvation *if* they refuse to continue to walk in the light (a lifestyle of loving Jesus and following His commands).
 - d. Let's explore further what it means to "walk in the light". Our spiritual battle is described in many places in Scripture as a battle between the light and the darkness.

1. Read **John 3:19-21**.

- a. Jesus is the light who has come into the world.
- b. Those who love the truth are willing to come into the light.
- c. Many people love darkness because their deeds are evil.
 - i. Like mice or cockroaches (or other unwanted pests that prefer darkness) tend to flee when the lights are turned on.
 - ii. Similarly, those who are engaged in evil deeds and do not want to repent will flee the spiritual light.

2. Read **Acts 26:17-18**.

- a. Jesus described Paul's evangelistic mission as one of turning sinners out of darkness, into the light; to forsake their evil ways.
- b. This is the essence of evangelism (not just calling others to believe or to "join a church").

3. Read **1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**.

- a. Paul appeals to the Christians: they are sons of the light, so don't go back to the way of darkness.
 - b. He uses the day/night contrast to point the Christians away from things associated with night and darkness (sleeping and drunkenness).
 - c. Instead, they need to be watching and vigilant.
- e. Notice how the apostle John addresses sin first in this letter, even before speaking about love.
- i. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (**1 John 1:8-9**, NKJV)
1. Here we have two "if" statements.
- a. "If we say we have no sin...", then we are liars.
 - b. "If we confess our sins...", then we will continue to be cleansed and forgiven.
- ii. The critical importance for Christians to be confessing our sins.

1. **Personal Question:** When was the last time you confessed your sins? Do you confess your sins, or do you hide them?
 - a. If you claim that you have no sins to confess, John says you are a liar!
 - b. If you have sins but are not confessing them, is it because you prefer to live in the darkness?
2. Read **James 5:13-18**.
 - a. *"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."* (**James 5:16**, NKJV)
 - b. **Question:** Do you see this as just a 'nice suggestion', or is it something that *James actually expects us to do*?
 - c. Perhaps you are thinking, "Well, I'll just confess my sins *to God*; I don't need to confess them to any person."
 - i. What does James say here? What is he telling us we need to do?
 - ii. I can appreciate the reluctance of some to confess their sins to others. Frankly, I have seen some damage done when this is handled poorly.
 1. First of all, you need to make sure that the person you confess your sins to is someone who can keep strict confidence. It would be terrible if they engage in gossip and shared your sins with others!
 2. It is wise to be selective about who to be open with.
 - a. A brother to a brother, and a sister to a sister.
 - b. Someone with iron-clad commitment to keeping a trust, who would never, under any circumstances, share something told in confidence.
 3. Also, I have seen damage done when someone confesses their sin to someone who is either:
 - a. Harsh and controlling; or
 - b. (at the other extreme) someone who takes serious sin lightly, saying "That's OK, we are all terrible sinners; don't worry about it."

4. Instead, we need to seek out (and be) mature spiritual disciples who can listen and provide proper spiritual input, as Jesus and Paul would.
 - a. Consider on the one hand how strong Paul was when confronting *unrepentant* sexual sin in **1 Corinthians 5**.
 - b. Yet Paul also led the way in mercy and comfort toward the sinner *who had repented*, in **2 Corinthians 2**.
 - c. May the Holy Spirit, the spirit of wisdom, understanding and counsel (**Isaiah 11:1-4**) guide us all in this!
- d. Bottom line: Do whatever you need to do to find someone you trust, a spiritual and mature person to confess your sins to. Then make a practice of confessing your sins.
 - i. I have known people who would call a Christian on the other side of the world, multiple time zones away (a mature person, someone they knew they could trust) to call and confess their sins to. *Do whatever it takes!*
- e. Remember the story of Cain and Abel, where Cain protests, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (**Genesis 4:9**) We *do* need to be looking out for our brothers!
 - i. Remember, we are all under attack from Satan.
 1. “Be sober, be vigilant; because *your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion*, seeking whom he may devour.” (**1 Peter 5:8**, NKJV)
 - ii. A few times I have had a sense that I needed to ask a brother I was with about how they were doing in the area of sexual purity, including internet pornography. (After all, we are all under attack in that area.) When I took the initiative to ask, I discovered that there indeed had been a problem.
 1. The brothers involved had been struggling about whether to bring this up, and expressed gratitude that I had asked, out of concern for their souls.
 2. They also remarked that *practically no one among their other Christian friends* ever took the initiative to ask them about this!
 3. Satan does not want us to come into the light.

4. Over the years I have seen the lives of so many men, including spiritual leaders, fall to serious sin (and destroy their families, churches, ministries and their own spiritual lives in the process). The underlying problem: they did not confess their sins and temptations; and in the end, they were completely overcome.
 - a. I recall an old saying, I think from an early Christian writer: "It is easier to kill the cub than the full-grown lion" (referring to temptation and sin).
 - b. It is better to confess and repent of a sin at the early, temptation level, before it grows into something much worse.
5. Please, *I urge you*, take the initiative to ask one another about this respectfully, and about other sins as well. *This one thing could make all the difference in your eternal salvation!*
 - a. Listen to your conscience and consider the sins you need to confess, such as: sexual impurity, pornography, lust, deceit, stealing, lying, drunkenness, improper use of drugs, fits of rage, hatred, unforgiveness, greed, etc.
 - b. "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy." (**Proverbs 28:13**, NKJV)
 - c. Don't lead a spiritual double-life. Get out of the darkness; and come into the light.

iii. **Conclusions and Summary**

1. The blessings John speaks about in this first chapter of his letter are based on conditions, indicated by the word "if".
 - a. "If we walk in the light...if we confess our sins..."
 - b. Let us find great confidence and assurance in the wonderful promises of God; however, let us also recognize when there are conditions involved, and take those very seriously as well.
2. John starts off his letter to the Christians by addressing sin. Let us also begin today by walking in the light of righteousness; and by confessing our own sins.

3. Never forget that evangelism is about getting people out of the darkness and into the light.