

That You May Know

The First Letter of John

Today's Disciple Commentary Series

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Published by JPT Books

That You May Know: The First Letter of John
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Introduction to the Series

This series started out as personal Bible study notes. It was not originally intended to go further. It was originally intended simply as a means for the author to demonstrate some understanding of God's Word. Although having studied the Scriptures for 30+ years, 1 John was the first attempt at a truly in-depth study of a complete book followed by pulling the results into something akin to a book, which has now been reformatted and made freely available here.

This series proceeds under several important understandings. First, that the Bible is the Word of God, and is, as stated in many modern creeds, "the final authority on faith and practice." While you as the reader may take a different view, know that such a view contrasts sharply with the writers of the Bible themselves. And bringing such a view into a study of Scripture will necessarily color your interpretation.

Second, that the Bible is true and accurate in what it purports to teach. If you are seeking to prove (or disprove) the authenticity of the Bible, this is not the series for you. The accuracy of the Bible is assumed, so no attempt has been made to defend it.

Third, and perhaps most important of all, that the central message of the Bible is that of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The events and teaching of the Old Testament lead up to the gospel, and the books of Acts-Revelation spring from the gospel. If you are unfamiliar with the Gospel, then you are encouraged to read the Gospels, particularly John, before beginning any other book of Scripture.

Every effort has been made to remain faithful to the text of Scripture and to the original intent of the authors. Therefore, what you will see in this series is "plain sense interpretation." The series

is not based on a specific translation, nor does it reflect any one tradition of Christianity. As much as possible, the author has allowed the text to speak for itself.

Of course, these commentaries cannot (and certainly *should not*) replace the individual study of Scripture itself. At best, a commentary can give some guidance on how one should think about Scripture and put things into perspective. However, one should never fall into the trap of taking doctrine from commentaries or other secondhand sources when it comes to Scripture. In this, the Reformers were eloquent in their simple statement of *sola scriptura*.

A Note on Formatting and Content

Commentaries in this series are not designed to be full verse-by-verse commentaries. Not every verse is given the same amount of attention. This is not to suggest that some verses are unimportant or less important than others. If the Holy Spirit chose to allow any words into Scripture, then they certainly do have relevance. Rather, the idea behind the format is to concentrate on the overall picture and thought patterns of the authors.

This series was deliberately written to appeal to one who may not have a great foundation in Scripture. It was not designed to be “scholarly” in nature (though careful research has been done at all points). It contains notes that help explain some of the concepts, such as technical or theological terms along with important information regarding meaning of words in the original languages. Rather than placing them in the text, footnotes are given to this information. This allows the reader to come back to those notes later but does not interrupt the train of thought. While attention is given to difficult or controversial passages (e.g., John 7:53-8:11), no attempt has been made to claim “the final argument” on any question. Rather the treatment of controversies in this series is meant to stimulate your own thinking on the subject.

In the end, any commentary or book is only as helpful as the Holy Spirit allows it to be. If, during your use of this you find enlightenment through the Holy Spirit, that is the only thing a true servant of Christ can ask.

Introduction to 1 John

“How can I know that I’m saved?” This is a common question asked by Christians, particularly believers who are young in the faith and have experienced the forgiveness of Christ only to fall back into sin. They begin to doubt and wonder about their salvation; some wonder if they have gone too far. The questions can seem endless, leading them down a road of despair, legalism, and even disillusionment.

The first letter of the Apostle John was written just for such a person. John assures his readers that they can indeed know that they are saved (the phrase “know that” appears some 18 times in the letter). In fact, he specifically wrote the letter so that “you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1:3), and so that “you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13). Thus, the letter answers the question, “How can I know?”

The answer lies in a series of signs or evidences. It is as though John is saying, “This is what a believer looks like,” and paints us a picture. He does this by using very familiar themes (many of these themes are also found in the Gospel of John), such as light and darkness, love and hate, life and death. It is important to note when reading 1 John that the Apostle focuses on consistency, rather than perfection (as he makes clear in 1:5-10). To read the letter any other way is to violate the very tests he lays down.

Authorship and Date

This first letter of John was written late in his life, probably about 85-95 A.D. The place of writing is not stated, though early tradition states that he wrote it from Ephesus. Contrary to many attempts to refute the teachings of this letter, there are no valid reasons to reject the strong evidence for the date and authenticity of the letter.

Purpose

As mentioned earlier, John wrote his letter with a specific purpose in mind: to give assurance of salvation to the believer (5:13). As such, everything that he writes is geared toward that.

Themes

As in his gospel, the apostle uses many familiar contrasting themes such as love/hate, light/darkness, truth/lies, belief/unbelief. He often uses stark, direct sentences to contrast these ideas, and if one is not careful, it would be easy to fall into extreme error. This letter should likely be studied after one has completed John's gospel, since many of the themes in this book are introduced there.

Outline

The way that John writes often makes it difficult for modern readers to outline his work. However, taking the overall message of the letter and following its development, one can easily get a workable outline. Our outline is as follows:

- I. John's Purpose: Maintaining Fellowship (1:1-10)
- II. Evidences Part I (2:1-2:17)
- III. Counter-Examples (2:18-29)
- IV. Evidences Part II: What it Looks Like (3:1-24)
- V. Final Exam (4:1-5:12)
- VI. Confidence After Passing the Test (5:13-21)

I. John's Purpose: Maintaining Fellowship (1:1-10)

John begins his letter by introducing its subject – Christ as the Word of Life. Throughout the entire letter, this is the theme around which the letter revolves – the truth of Christ and Christ as the Truth.

A) Introduction and Purpose (1:1-4)

John opens his letter the same way he opens his gospel--by focusing on Christ. The words "[t]hat which was from the beginning" (v. 1) clearly link back to John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word" The phrase "the Word of life" (v. 1b) starts one of John's favorite themes, that of Jesus as the Life--that is the source and giver of all life.

The Apostle makes it clear that he is not writing about some idea or figment of the imagination. Rather, he reminds his readers that he and the other apostles actually saw, spoke with, and touched Christ. He is saying "I am an eyewitness" (and he was probably the last of the original apostles to die, hence an urgency that is present in his writings). He writes as an eyewitness to proclaim the Divine Message (that of Christ as the Life), so that his readers can have fellowship with the Father and the Son as well as the messengers.

B) How to Maintain Fellowship: Walking in the Light (1:5-10)

Having established his credentials, John then puts forth his message, and it is a simple one: "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all" (v. 5). Then he draws out the implications of this statement, which can be seen as the requirements of maintaining fellowship. The standard is walking in the light.

If we profess to have fellowship with God but walk in darkness, we lie. Jesus calls such behavior hypocrisy.¹ He frequently described the Pharisees by this term, since they were all about appearances and being seen to be religious but being dead inside. If, however, we walk in the light, we are told that we have fellowship with the Community of Faith and Christ's blood cleanses us from all sin.

John then seems to repeat himself, but what he is actually doing is being more specific, answering the unasked question, "What do you mean by that?" He answers by asserting that if we claim to have no sin, we are self-deceived, and "His word is not in us." If, however, we confess our sin, we are assured that God will be faithful to not only forgive our sin but also cleanse us. Walking in the light then means that we have no unconfessed sin in our life that is known to us.² This brings to mind the words Christ spoke as He washed His disciples' feet in John 13:10, "Jesus said to [Peter], 'The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean.'" After one is saved by the blood of Christ, he is cleansed. But, as he goes through life, his feet get dirty, and it is necessary that his feet be washed. This is what John pictures in his words of confession and cleansing.

¹ Greek *hupokrites*, "one who wears a mask, an actor, stage player; a dissembler, pretender,"

² It is possible that we sin and do not realize it as a sin; that is a different matter.

II. Evidences Part I (2:1-17)

John now turns to the signs or marks of a believer. How can we know that we (or anyone) is a believer? John gives specific, concrete characteristics in this section. Before beginning to look at what follows, it is important to note that John does not here teach that “do these things in order to be saved.” That is a works-theology and completely at odds with the Gospel. Instead John teaches, “This is what a believer looks like. A believer does these things because he is a believer.”

A) Keeping His commandments (2:1-6)

In beginning to talk about the marks of the true believer, John starts with a note of encouragement. He reminds his readers that his intent is to give them the knowledge they need so that they will not sin, not altogether different from a teacher giving the information and skills needed to pass an exam. He then reassures them, lest after reading the opening words of this section they realize that they have sinned and despair. He reassures his readers that even if they do sin, there is hope in the person of Christ, who became their (and our) substitute, taking the penalty for our sin upon Himself.³

The first sign of a true believer, John writes, is that of keeping Christ’s commandments (v. 3, “keeps His word” in v. 5 are synonymous). John then goes on to elaborate with a series of contrasting statements, common for him in this letter. If one claims to know God but does not keep His commandments, John says that such a one is a liar and the “truth is not in him.” This construction suggests strongly that here John is talking about a person who claims to be a believer but is not, whereas in 1:5-10 he uses the construction “does not practice the truth.” In that passage,

³ Greek *hilasmos*, “propitiation, appeasing [of God’s wrath].”

he is speaking of a believer who refuses to admit he has sinned, and thus his fellowship with Christ is hindered.

John contrasts the unbeliever of verse 4 with the person who does keep Christ's commandments in verse 5. In such a person, he says, the love of God is perfected. The sense (and preferred translation) is "made complete," expressing the idea that as the believer keeps Christ's commandments he will experience continuous growth in his faith and relationship with the Father.⁴

Using language borrowed from Christ, John introduces another theme, that of abiding in Christ. He summarizes this section by telling his readers that if anyone claims to abide in Christ, it should be evident that he is walking just as Christ walked, keeping the Father's commandments.

B) Loving the brethren (2:7-11)

One might ask, as some did in Jesus' day, "And what is His commandment?" John's reply is, "Love one another." He tells his readers that this commandment is both an old (v. 7) and a new (v. 8) commandment. It is an old commandment because it is found in the Old Testament, the Scriptures at the time (see Deut. 19:18, for example). At the same time, though, it is new because Christ has displayed the fullness of what it means to love, in that He laid down His life for us. While love was taught in the Old Testament as the Great Commandment, the notion that an innocent man would die for the guilty was not. In this same way, John says we should love the brethren.

Here again John uses contrasting statements to illustrate. He says that whoever claims to be in the light and yet hates his brother remains in darkness (v. 9). On the other hand, whoever loves his brother is truly in the light, and being in the light, he can see anything that would cause him to stumble. That is not true, John says, of the one who hates his brother. Such a person is in such great darkness that he "walks in the darkness, and does not know

⁴ Greek *teleioo*, "to make perfect, complete; to carry through completely, to accomplish, finish, bring to an end."

where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (v. 11).

C) Growing in the faith (2:12-17)

Verses 12-17 might seem to be out of place, as a bump in the road. However, they serve as yet another evidence of one's salvation. The groups mentioned in this passage illustrate the pattern of growth in a believer, from little children (those babes in the faith), who grow into young men (and women) and finally mature into fathers (spiritually speaking). They started out as disciples, learning at the feet of another, and now as fathers they are able to teach and disciple others. The implication of the passage is that growth is natural in the life of a true believer. Someone who is not growing may not be a true believer.

Jesus mentioned much the same thing in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-9). The one who grows in his faith in 1 John is like the good soil who produces a harvest. Note that it is not the size of the harvest that counts, because Jesus did indicate that different people bring forth different harvests. The point, however, is that all true believers grow and produce fruit.

How does one continue to grow and produce fruit? John gives this explanation: "Do not love the world or the things of the world" (v. 15). This is the same idea that Jesus taught when He cautioned against storing up earthly treasures. As the believer focuses his life on the things of God, it will be natural that he grow. Believers are not to love the world for two reasons. First, the things of the world ("lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life") are not from God, and we should be focused on things of God. Secondly because the world "is passing away." It is temporary. But, as John reminds us, believers will abide forever.

III. Counter-Examples (2:18-29)

In this next section, John briefly turns from the character of the believer to that of the unbeliever. Specifically, he is writing about people he refers to as “antichrists.” Historically, these people denied the teachings of the apostles. Though these statements (and indeed all of Scripture) was written regarding specific people, the principles behind the statements are as relevant today as they were in John’s time.

A) Rejection of Fellowship (2:18-19)

John starts by identifying these “antichrists” as those who have left the fellowship of the church. This is not the same thing as the church removing someone from fellowship for unrepentant sin.⁵ Rather these people rejected the fellowship and left the church voluntarily. In John’s day, as there were no “denominations,” leaving the church meant living in the world without the protection of Christ, cut off from the means of grace. John then pointedly remarks that if they had been “of us” (meaning believers, part of the fellowship), they would have remained. Thus, while a true believer will seek to remain in fellowship, the false will often fall away and leave the church.

This passage poses some problems in the modern era, with so many different churches. And it poses problems for someone who, for example, might leave the church after being wounded by the leadership. There have been many people who have declared, “I’ll never set foot in a church again,” but still claim to love Christ. This is a difficult issue, and as is true with many things, it comes down to matters of the heart, things only God can see. But, the truth remains that a true believer has a natural desire to be part of the fellowship of Christ.

⁵ See Matt. 18:15-20.

B) Denial of Christ (2:20-23)

Apparently, those who left the fellowship (vv. 18-19) claimed to have some special anointing to receive the “truth,” which was often at odds with the teaching of Christ and the apostles. At the same time, they denied that Jesus was “the Christ.” To understand this, it’s important to know that some taught that “the Christ” was a spiritual manifestation that came upon the man Jesus at baptism and left before the crucifixion. Others taught that Jesus and “the Christ” were the same but that Jesus was not a true human, but a spirit only. In either case they were denying the Incarnation, that God became a man.

We see much the same thing today, with many different ideas as to Jesus and the Christ, from a teacher to a good man, etc. John pointedly says that anyone who denies that Jesus (the real man Jesus) is the Christ also denies the Father. But, those who confess the Son have the Father also. This confession is one that affirms the Incarnation. One cannot, according to John, deny any part of the incarnation and be a believer in Christ.

C) Living in Lies (2:24-29)

John concludes this section by reminding his readers to abide in that which was taught to them from the beginning--the truth of Christ. The implication is that those who have departed are now living a life of lies. But those who continue to abide in Christ will be granted eternal life and will have confidence when they stand before Him--not in themselves of course, but in His work in them.

IV. Evidences Part II: What it Looks Like (3:1-24)

This section continues John's look at the life of a believer. It is practical in nature, and takes the reader from point A (grace and hope) to the end (assurance before God). Read in its entirety, it reminds one of Paul's message in Romans 8, the great chain of events from predestination to glorification. It serves as an encouragement to the believer to continue in the faith.

A) Grace and hope lead to purity (3:1-3)

John's opening words in chapter 3 are meant to evoke a response of "Wow!" And, in truth, once a believer truly understands what has been done for him, that reaction is quite natural. The guilty are forgiven, but that's not all. They are called righteous in God's sight, but that's not all. The ones who were once guilty and alienated from God are called children of God! And if that weren't enough, we are promised, as children of God, that one day we shall be like Him, once again morally perfect without any spot or blemish.

This is the hope, John says in verse 3, that the believer has. This hope is to be understood more as a "certainty" than a "perhaps."⁶ Since the believer has such a hope, he purifies himself just as Christ is pure. What does that entail? John gives his answer to this question in the following verses.

B) Purity means practicing righteousness (3:4-10)

To be pure, according to John, is to practice righteousness (v. 7). In this section, it is important to notice John refers to "the practice of," rather than single acts. A broken clock can sometimes

⁶ Greek *elpis*, "joyful and confident expectation of eternal salvation." Paul uses similar phrases (see for example Acts 23:6; Gal. 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:10, 3:12), always denoting the certainty of the thing, not merely a possibility.

indicate the correct time and sometimes the incorrect time. But a working clock shows the correct time consistently. In the same way, a believer will consistently (though not perfectly) practice righteousness. The unbeliever, however, cannot help but live a life of sin. John reminds us that the one who practices sin also practices lawlessness. This is because the unbeliever is living as a law unto himself, rather than doing the will of God.

One who claims to know God yet has not changed from a life of habitual sin has never encountered or known Him, John says. And one who has truly encountered Christ and abides in him cannot help but change from a life of sin to one of righteousness (v. 6). Again, let it be said that what is in view here is the big picture, the lifestyle, rather than single individual acts of sin, which the believer would confess and forsake (1:5-10). The change may--indeed will--be progressive, but it will absolutely take place, because one who has God's seed in him cannot help it (v. 9). The practice of righteousness, then, is one of the surest marks of a believer (v. 10), along with loving the brethren, which John includes here and elaborates on in the next section.

C) Practicing Righteousness: Loving the Brethren (3:11-18)

John's readers would have heard his message "from the beginning," that is, his oral teachings. And that message had not changed--believers are to love one another (here it seems that the term "one another" and "brother" refer to the household of faith). He contrasts the love we are to have with the hatred that Cain had toward his brother Abel, and reminds us that Cain killed his brother because Cain was of the world ("his own deeds were evil," v. 12b) and Abel was born of God ("his brother's righteous," v. 12c). Therefore, he says, we who are not "of the world" should not be surprised that the world hates us.

Then the apostle again resorts to a stark contrast to illustrate. He says that we know that we have passed from death to life if we love the brethren. On the other hand, whoever does not love abides in death. He then amplifies this statement--everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, then pointedly says, "and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (v. 15).

Does John mean that a “murderer” (in the sense of killing people) cannot be forgiven? For several reasons, that interpretation is unlikely. Here John is speaking of “murder” in the same sense that Christ compared murder to anger and hate of a brother (Matt. 5:21-22).

In any case, this passage does not speak to the question of whether a murderer can be forgiven and saved. The point John is making is simply that a true believer will not have hatred in his heart and a person who does have such hatred toward the brethren could not be a believer.

In the final part of this section, John answers a question that one may ask, “What does loving my brother look like?” He answers in practical terms. We lay down our lives for the brethren (v. 16), and we do not turn away from a brother in need (v. 17). His final statement on the matter is one that the apostle James would agree with: “Let us love in deed and truth, not just word or talk” (v.18).⁷

D) Practicing Righteousness: Assurance Before God (3:19-24)

A believer who truly practices righteousness and loves the brethren can find assurance before God, John writes. He first addresses an anxious question, that of the one whose heart condemns them (vv. 19-20). We can be assured in two ways: First, if we know that we are practicing righteousness and love toward the brethren as best we know, then we can be assured that we are in Christ. Second, even if our heart should condemn us, God is greater than our heart and knows everything (including our heart).

Can a believer’s heart condemn him? Most certainly. Whether it be from an immature conscience, unrealized sin, or simply the ever-present attacks by the enemies of Christ, it is not uncommon for true believers to experience guilt, doubt and anxiety. This is why John gives this encouragement.

The apostle then turns to the rest--those that have clean hearts that do not condemn them. To these he says that they can

⁷ See James 1:27 where he speaks of “pure religion,” and 2:15-16, where he speaks of a brother or sister in need.

have “confidence” before God. This distinction is not by accident. The one who is condemned by their heart, though they are truly saved, can hardly have true confidence in the midst of anxiety, guilt and doubt. But when one is in a place of having a clean heart, then such a person can truly step out with the boldness of Christ to do His will, asking what he will and receiving his requests (vv. 21-22). Such a person, John says, can have that confidence because he keeps Christ’s commandments.

Before moving on, it should be noted here that there is no well-defined progression from one who needs assurance to the one who has confidence before God. It is possible (and common) for a believer to be in one state at one time in his life, move to the other state, and then back to the first. This is often the result of spiritual growing pains.

Finally, John summarizes what he has told us so far: The commandment is that we believe in Jesus Christ and love one another (v. 23). And he promises that those who keep those commandments do truly abide in God and God in them (v. 24a). As a final reminder, John tells us that we can know for certain that we are God’s, by the fact that He has given His Spirit to abide in us (v. 24b).

V. Final Exam (4:1-5:12)

After giving instruction to the believers, like any good teacher John then proceeds to lay out several tests. One who passes these tests can be assured of being a believer. John lays out these tests in such a way so that a believer can not only assure himself but can also identify false believers in the midst of the fellowship.

A) Test #1: Test the Spirits (4:1-6)

The first part of the test measures how well a believer can distinguish between the Spirit of God and other spirits. The context seems to suggest that he is referring specifically to so-called prophets (v, 1). He tells the believers to “test” (“try,” KJV) the spirits to see whether they be from God. Paul apparently gave a similar instruction to the Christians of Berea concerning his own teaching.⁸

What is the test? John tells us that any spirit (speaking through a person) that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh is of God, but any spirit that does not confess Jesus is not of God – indeed is the spirit of antichrist (vv. 2-3). John is not laying out some strict formula here. He is not necessarily advocating that a believer ask the person, “What do you think of Jesus?” The sense, rather, is that the spirit behind the prophet will be obvious in what he teaches about Christ. Nowhere in Scripture is it commanded that we interrogate a spirit or a prophet. The assumption is that a true believer, grounded in the truth, will be able to tell.

Verses 5-6 support this, in that the implication is that if a prophet is teaching anything at odds with apostolic teaching, it

⁸ See Acts 17:10-11. The text does not explicitly state that Paul gave such an instruction, but it would certainly not be out of the question. Paul *does* specifically state that the words of the prophets are to be judged by the congregation (1 Cor. 14:29).

will be obvious to the congregation (“by this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error,” v. 6).⁹

B) Test #2: Test of Love (4:7-12)

The second part of the test is one of love. The test is meant to cause the believer to ask, “Do I (or another believer) love others as God loves them?” John reminds us that “God is love” (v. 8b). Because God is love, one who does not love does not know God. Then John reminds us of what love looks like: God sent His Son into the world so that we might live through Him (v. 9), and He loved us (before we could even think of loving Him) and sent His Son to pay the penalty for our sins (v. 10)

C) Test #3: Test of Doctrine (4:13-15)

The third part of the test seems at first glance to be a repeat of the first. It is a test of doctrine. Yet, it is a different question here. The first test sought to test the spirit behind a prophetic utterance. This test seeks to determine the actual belief and commitment of a person claiming to know God. The question is a simple one: “Who do you say that Jesus is?”

There are two confessions here. First, Jesus is the Son of God. In saying that, one confesses that Jesus is one with God (begotten, not created). Second, Jesus was sent to be the Savior of the world. Note here that He was not sent just to save the Jewish nation, but “the world.” Indeed, Christ testified of that when He gave one of His most well-known statements of all time: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

Though not stated in the text, the two confessions are inextricably linked, and John says that anyone who confesses Jesus as the Son of God, and thus as his Savior, has God abiding in him.

⁹ The phrase “listens to us” here suggests the idea that the prophet at one time received teaching from the apostles or their representatives. One cannot adhere to (or “listen to”) a teaching that one has not received.

The reverse is also true. Anyone who does not confess Jesus as the Son of God, rejecting His work as Savior, does not have God.

D) Results of the Test: Pass or Fail (4:16-5:12)

At first glance, this section seems to be a series of loose repetitions of what John has already taught. In truth, however, it is John showing the results of the tests put forth. We are told what happens when one passes the tests (i.e., is a true believer).

First, “we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us” (4:16). In the modern church, there seems to be a serious lack of the understanding of the love of God for the believer. Many suffer from a lack of trust in the Father’s love and goodness. Once someone has come to truly know and believe the love of God and abides in that love, John says His love is perfected in us (made complete).

Second, because the love of God is being perfected in us, we “have confidence for the day of judgment” (v. 17). We have confidence because we are no longer afraid (v. 18). Here John speaks of fear in the sense of terror, not in the sense of the positive “fear of the Lord” that is holy and reverent.

Third, one who has passed the tests loves his brother. John says that it’s impossible for one to claim to love God yet hate his brother (v. 20). His logic is unassailable here. It is much easier to love one we can see and touch. Therefore, if one cannot love the one they can see and touch, how can he claim to love the One who is unseen, the One that we interact with through faith? He further ties all of this together. Keeping the commandments necessarily includes loving God and loving the brethren (5:2).

Before moving on, John reminds us that Christ’s commandments are not “burdensome” (v. 3). That is not to say that the act of love is not difficult at times or that a believer will not struggle. “Burdensome” in this context can be compared to the law which was called a yoke and a burden by other writers such as Peter and Paul. It was a burden because the people did not in themselves have the power to obey, whereas now the Spirit-indwelt believer, with the new heart, has the power to obey; the law is written on his heart.

Fourth, the one who passes the tests overcomes the world (v. 4). When the New Testament writers speak of overcoming the world, they do so in the sense of the spiritual. That is to say that one who has overcome the world has held steadfast to his faith and has not given in to the lusts and temptations of the world. It is through our faith that we overcome the world. John pointedly remarks that the only one capable of overcoming the world is the one who “believes that Jesus is the Son of God” (v. 5).

Finally, John tells us that whoever passes the tests has the very testimony of God within him. This testimony is concerning the One who came by water (referring to Christ’s baptism) and the blood (his death on the cross).¹⁰ Whoever receives the Son of God (i.e., trusts in Him for salvation) has this testimony in himself (v. 10a). But, whoever denies the Son of God does not have the testimony, and also is calling God a liar. The testimony is that God has given His Son to us that we might have eternal life through Him (vv. 11-12).

¹⁰ This is likely another reference to those who denied that Jesus and “the Christ” were the same. To them, the Christ would have come upon Jesus at His baptism (by water), but left Jesus before His death on the cross. John is affirming here that God’s testimony of His Son is that Jesus is the Christ, and that He came by water and blood.

VI. Confidence After Passing the Test (5:13-21)

In this final section of the letter, John returns to his purpose – assurance and confidence. In this section, he mentions two of the outcomes when we have confidence before God because we have passed the tests.

A) Confidence in Prayer (5:13-17)

Here, John first repeats his purpose. He is writing this letter to the believers so that they can know (with certainty) that they have eternal life (v. 13). They can know this by examining themselves according to what he has written before. Because we now have confidence before God through Christ, John says that we can be confident that “if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him” (vv. 14:15).

Contrary to some views, this is not a “blank check” when it comes to prayer. Note that there are two limitations on this. First, we must be in a place where we have such a confidence, i.e., we know that we are keeping His commandments and loving the brethren as best we know at any point in time. We confess our sins so that He may cleanse us. Second, the thing asked is “according to His will.” Jesus taught much the same when He told the disciples whatever they ask in His name would be granted (John 14:13-14).¹¹ Nevertheless, John writes, we can in fact have confidence that those things that we ask according to His will shall be done.

¹¹ The Greek word here translated “name” (*onoma*) has the sense of not just a “name,” but representing everything about the person, character, will and feelings. The Greek word translated “will” (*thelema*) means “what one wishes or has determined shall be done; what God wishes to be done by us.”

There is yet another limitation on our prayer that John addresses separately, and it has sparked confusion for centuries — that of the “sin leading to death” (vv. 16-17). John tells us that if we see a brother committing a sin “not leading to death,” we should pray for him and God will give him (the brother) life. But John explicitly says, “I do not say that one should pray for [the sin leading to death]” (v. 16b). The clear implication of verse 16 is that such a prayer would not be granted.

For various reasons, several things seem clear. First, in calling the person committing the sin a “brother,” John is likely using the word in a broad sense. This would be a person who is in the church, professing to be a believer, actively involved in the life of the fellowship, but inside is not truly a believer. Second, the sin that the “brother” commits is one that cannot be repented of (that is to say that the “brother” would not or could not repent of it).

Based on this, the most likely interpretation of this passage is the following: John is describing a person active in the fellowship, professing to be a believer, who may or may not be in leadership, but who is not truly a believer. The sin that John describes is willful rejection of Christ and the fellowship, similar to the situation described in Hebrews 6:4-6. It is not that such a sin is not forgivable by God; rather it is that the person would not seek such forgiveness. In any event, it is the case that the person was never a true believer in the first place.

B) Confidence in Living for God (5:18-19)

In addition to having confidence that our prayers will be heard, John tells us that we can have confidence that we will continue to grow in our faith. He writes that those who are born of God do not keep on sinning but “he who was born of God” protects him (v. 18). The preferred translation here is “He,” indicating Christ. The alternate translation would mean that the believer protects himself, and such a translation is untenable, given Christ’s words that He keeps His sheep (John 10:28-29). John also indicates that a believer will be protected from the evil one (literally, “will not touch him”). The preferred meaning here, however, is one of “lay hold of.” It is obvious that the enemy does

continue to attack the believer (often more so than before he was saved). What the verse means, then, is that God protects the believer from anything outside of His will (like in Job), and anything that is allowed to happen God will work it for our good.

C) Confidence in Knowing the Truth (5:20-21)

Finally, John assures the believers that we can have confidence in knowing (“understanding,” v. 20) the truth. The heretics of that day were teaching that only by joining their special group could one really know the truth, not unlike today when people wonder if we can even know truth absolutely. John answers that we can know truth, and the truth is embodied in the Person of the Jesus Christ. Since we know and believe Him, we abide in Him.

John’s closing statement, “Keep yourselves from idols,” may seem a little out of place. However, if one remembers that an idol is anything that would distract or set itself up as God in our lives, be it a thing, person or idea, then the statement is not so odd in context. John is reminding us to hold to what we have been taught and what we know to be true, letting nothing else replace it.

Questions for Further Study and Reflection

The study questions that follow are designed to help you think more deeply about John's first epistle and how its teachings might be applied to your life and those around you.

I. John's Purpose: Maintaining Fellowship (1:1-10)

1. John begins by emphasizing what he has "heard," "seen," and "touched" concerning the Word of life (1:1-3). Why do you think John stresses the physical, tangible nature of Jesus so strongly at the beginning of this letter?
2. What is the connection between our fellowship with God and our fellowship with other believers according to 1:3-4? Why can't we have one without the other?
3. John says "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1:5). What does it mean practically to "walk in the light" as opposed to walking in darkness?
4. How does 1 John 1:8-10 challenge both those who claim to be sinless and those who excuse their sin? What is the proper biblical response to our ongoing struggle with sin?

II. Evidences Part I (2:1-2:17)

1. John calls Jesus our "advocate with the Father" (2:1). How does this role of Jesus as advocate give us confidence when we do sin?

2. In 2:3-6, John says we can know that we know Christ if we keep His commandments. How do we reconcile this with salvation by grace through faith? What is the relationship between obedience and assurance?

3. John writes about an "old commandment" that is also a "new commandment" (2:7-8). What commandment is he referring to, and in what sense is it both old and new?

4. What are the marks of someone who "loves the world" according to 2:15-17? How can we examine our own hearts to see if we love the world or the Father?

5. Why do you think John addresses "little children," "fathers," and "young men" separately in 2:12-14? What can we learn from the specific things he says to each group?

III. Counter-Examples (2:18-29)

1. John warns about "antichrists" who have gone out from the church (2:18-19). What does their departure reveal about their true spiritual state? What comfort can true believers take from this?

2. What is the "anointing" that believers have received according to 2:20, 27? How does this anointing help us discern truth from error?

3. The primary heresy John addresses seems to involve denying that Jesus is the Christ (2:22). Why is this denial so serious? What does it reveal about someone's relationship with God?

4. How can we practice "abiding in Him" (2:28) so that we can have confidence and not shrink back in shame at His coming?

IV. Evidences Part II: What it Looks Like (3:1-24)

1. John marvels at the love of God that makes us His children (3:1). How should this identity as children of God affect the way we live and the way we view ourselves?

2. John says that when Christ appears "we shall be like him" (3:2). How should this future hope affect our present pursuit of holiness?

3. In 3:4-10, John makes strong statements about sin and the children of God. How do we reconcile these verses with the reality that believers still struggle with sin (as stated in 1:8-10)?

4. The command to love one another is illustrated negatively through Cain's example (3:11-15). What does this passage teach us about the connection between hatred and murder? How seriously should we take anger and bitterness in our own hearts?

5. John defines love not as feeling or words, but as action and truth (3:16-18). What are some practical ways we can "lay down our lives" for our brothers and sisters in Christ?

V. Final Exam (4:1-5:12)

1. Why is it so important to "test the spirits" (4:1)? What are the dangers of accepting every spiritual teacher or message without discernment?

2. John gives a clear test for discerning true teachers from false ones in 4:2-3. Why is the confession that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" the crucial test? What heresies does this expose?

3. John writes, "God is love" (4:8, 16). How is this different from saying "love is God"? Why does the distinction matter?

4. How did God demonstrate His love for us according to 4:9-10? How does this definition of love differ from the world's understanding of love?

5. John says that God's commandments "are not burdensome" (5:3). Why do they sometimes feel burdensome to us? What makes them not burdensome to those who are truly born of God?

VI. Confidence After Passing the Test (5:13-21)

1. John states his purpose in writing: "that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13). Based on everything John has written in this letter, how can we know with certainty that we have eternal life?
2. What kind of confidence in prayer does John describe in 5:14-15? What does it mean to pray "according to his will"?
3. John distinguishes between sin that leads to death and sin that does not lead to death (5:16-17). What do you think this distinction means? How should this affect our prayers for fellow believers who are sinning?
4. The letter ends with a stark warning: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (5:21). Why do you think John ends with this particular warning? What are the idols that most tempt believers today?
5. Looking back over the entire letter, what are the main evidences or tests that John gives for assurance of salvation? How do these tests both comfort true believers and challenge false professors?