

# GOD WITH US

## Part 11: LATER LETTERS

### Message 11 – 1 John Walking in Truth 1John 1-4:6

#### Introduction

The apostle John has many references about his life and ministry in the N.T. Along with his brother James (martyred Acts 12:2), and Peter, the 3 men were Jesus' inner circle. His life with Jesus (Gospels), ministry in the early church (Acts) and specifically the Gospel of John, 1,2,3 John and Revelation, cumulatively give his words and admonitions extreme importance. He lived for many decades after the other apostles had died. (A more detailed account of John's life and ministry will be in an addendum following the notes on (1John 4 & 5). The gospel of John is very unique when compared with the other 3 gospels (which is why scholars call the other 3 the "synoptic gospels," meaning they "see similarly"). The book of Revelation stands as the only book of prophecy in the New Testament. And John's 3 letters are unique in their emphasis on love for others as the essential evidence of true love for God. Thus, the apostle John played a key role in the establishment and growth of the early Christian church in the first century. One feature of John's literary style is that he tended to jump from subject to subject, often circling back to repeat an idea from a new angle. The following arrangement, provided by Craig Blomberg, in his academic volume, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, is very helpful. Three major themes occur in the book, with each them repeating three times (in cycles).

|                                          | Cycle 1 | Cycle 2   | Cycle 3 |
|------------------------------------------|---------|-----------|---------|
| <b>Keeping God's Commandments</b>        | 1:5-2:6 | 2:28-3:10 | 5:16-21 |
| <b>Loving one another</b>                | 2:7-17  | 3:11-24   | 4:7-21  |
| <b>Believing in Jesus as the God-man</b> | 2:18-27 | 4:1-6     | 5:1-15  |

## Prologue: The Incarnate Word: 1:1-4

John does not begin with an ordinary greeting, as found in other N.T. letters; rather, he begins much the same way he did in the gospel of John, focusing on the reality of the person of Christ, the “Word” of life (see John 1:1-18 where Jesus is called the “Word” of God – meaning the “revelation” or “expression” of God).

*“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 – 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 – 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. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete” (1:1-4).*

Here, he emphasizes the physical, tangible reality of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. False teachers (like the later Gnostics) taught that the physical world was evil, while spiritual realities were pure. Thus, they said that Jesus was not a real, physical human being; rather, He was some kind of ghost, or manifestation. He left no footprints when He walked; He felt no pain on the cross, etc. John emphasized the fact that he not only “saw” Jesus with his eyes, but also “touched” Him with his hands. John’s point: Jesus was not a ghost; He possessed real, tangible flesh and He was a real human being. At the end of this opening paragraph, he introduced a main emphasis of the letter: *fellowship with God*, which leads directly into what follows.

*Why does John’s joy depend on his readers understanding and embracing his message about Jesus (1:4)? Because he wanted all Christians to know and experience the great wonder of walking in fellowship with the true and living Christ. Those who know the Savior intimately can’t help but want to encourage other Christians to seek a deeper abiding knowledge and fellowship with Him, because of the joy they may be missing out on. How about you? Do you have a growing joy as you intentionally pursue knowing Christ? And then resulting in this great desire, as John did, to help others know Jesus more deeply?*

### 1<sup>st</sup> CYCLE: 1:5 – 2:27

John covers 3 themes in 3 cycles. The first major theme is that of obedience to God’s commandments as evidence of true faith.

## A. Keeping God's Commandments: 1:5-2:6

Obedience is evidence of a changed heart. Those who say they "know Jesus" will "walk as He walked" (2:6). If there is no resemblance to the character of Jesus, then there is no reality of relationship with Jesus.

### - Fellowship with God: 1:5-10

John was writing to believers who had established a *relationship* with God through faith in Jesus Christ. He was interested primarily in teaching them how to maintain *fellowship* with God (meaning intimacy in the relationship). One key aspect of maintaining fellowship with God is the practice of keeping "short accounts" when we become aware of sin in our lives.

***"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. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 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. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us" (1:5-10).***

Those who are walking in fellowship with God will walk in the Light (in obedience to God's Word) and confess sin(s) when they become aware of them. The moment we confess our sin (confess = "to agree with", or simply "to admit"), God forgives us and cleanses us "*from all unrighteousness.*" When we sin against God, it almost always involves sinning against another person. John doesn't focus on this, but JESUS DOES in Matt. 5:22-24. We MUST be reconciled to a person that we have hurt through our anger, words and actions. Note: Some of the false teachers said that people could live sinless lives if they denied all physical desires and lived in "the spiritual realm."

*Keep short accounts with God. Confess sin when you become aware of it. Practice "spiritual breathing." The "exhale" is confession of sin. The moment you confess (agree with God), you are cleansed of sin. The "inhale" is asking the Spirit to sit on the throne in your heart and to fill you with His power. (Another analogy is to let Christ get back in the driver's seat, and you move over). This is "keeping in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25).*

## **- Jesus our Advocate: 2:1-2**

How can we know that our sins are forgiven when we confess them? Because Jesus died for our sins and He is now in heaven acting as our advocate (defense attorney) constantly applying the finished work of His cross to our every sin and failure.

***“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; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (2:1,2).***

The death of Christ works in two different ways: 1) For believers, His death is the *accepted gift* of satisfaction (propitiation) for sins and the basis for Jesus’ ongoing advocacy on their behalf. 2) For unbelievers, His death is the *unaccepted gift* until there is a change of heart and acceptance. Jesus loved the whole world and proved it by dying for everyone, to make forgiveness and cleansing available to all; but God never forces His love on anyone. Each person must respond by accepting the gift of God’s love through Christ.

## **- Obedience as Evidence of truly Knowing God: 2:3-6**

John’s emphasis on *obedience* as *evidence* of truly knowing God does not imply “perfect obedience” (see 1:5-10 where he stated clearly that all believers will sin). John is talking about a consistent pattern or trajectory of walking in accordance with His commands and desiring to be more like Jesus.

***“By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. 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; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (2:3-6).***

False teachers were not only leading people astray as to the nature of the Person of Christ (saying He was not really human), but also as to the ways that Christ taught His followers to live. Some were teaching license (God’s grace is a free ticket to sin – see 2Peter 2:2 and Jude 4) while others were teaching strict practices of self-denial as the way to true salvation (1Timoth 4:1-4). Either way, the

teachings were not in accordance with the commandments that Jesus gave to His disciples.

*It has been rightly said that the best way to detect a lie is to know the truth. If you want to know "His commands", then study the 4 Gospels, and absorb JESUS' TEACHINGS and WARNINGS. Also, the letters of the N.T. This is imperative, so that we can know what they truly said. As we do so, our ability to discern lies and deviations will become well-developed. If we fail to develop good spiritual discernment, then we are easy targets for deception. Most importantly is our earnest effort to take the commands to heart to obey them for our good and God's pleasure and glory.*

### **B. Loving One Another: 2:7-17**

Loving people is a major theme in this letter. In fact, loving people is the *primary evidence* that we truly love God. This theme will become extremely pronounced in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cycles.

#### **- Walking according to the Love Commandment: 2:7-11**

Among the strongest commandments that Jesus gave to His followers was the "new commandment" to *love one another* (see John 13:34,35). This, said Jesus, would be the ultimate mark of His true disciples. Although Jesus called it a "new commandment," it was actually central to the O.T. teaching (Leviticus 19:18; as was the 1<sup>st</sup> priority of loving God, Deuteronomy 6:4). Jesus was bringing this love commandment to the forefront as a kind of summary of the Law. As He said in another place, the entire O.T. could be summarized in just two commandments: Love God and love your neighbor (Matt.22:36-40).

Now, many decades later, the apostle John was bringing the love commandment up again, not as a "*new commandment*," but as a commandment that the apostles had been teaching from the early days of the church. By the time John wrote this letter (probably 60 years after Jesus spoke His words at the Last Supper), the "new commandment" had become an "old commandment" well-known among Christians.

***"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. 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. The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. 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” (2:7-11).*

Hatred is the opposite of love, and it has no place in the life of a follower of Christ. In fact, if a person “hates his brother” then he is literally “in the darkness” and walking blind. Later in this letter John will state that it is impossible for someone to say they “love God” while not loving people (see 3:14; 4:20,21). Examine your own heart today. Are you harboring bitterness toward someone? Confess it to Jesus, your Advocate, and He will forgive you. Then, ask Him to give you the power to love those who have hurt you.

#### **- Stages of maturity: 2:12-14**

While John stressed the need for obedience as a sign of truly knowing God, he also recognized that there are stages in the process of Christian maturity. He described 3 stages of maturity, and the characteristics associated with each stage. He used the analogy of ‘family’, however he is ultimately referring to all people’s stages of spiritual maturity.

*“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake. 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. 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” (2:12-14).*

*Little children* know about forgiveness of sins and they have come to know God as their Father. *Sons and daughters* know about fighting against evil with the power of God’s Word abiding in them, and they are achieving victory over the Evil One. *Fathers* know God deeply as the eternal One Who has existed from the beginning. They have a fuller understanding of God’s eternal plans and purposes.

If you had to choose one of these three categories to describe your maturity as a follower of Jesus, which one would you choose? What do you think it would take for you to go to the next level in your maturity with Jesus? It could involve more learning of the truths of God's Word, being disciplined by a more mature follower of Christ, or more involvement in actual ministry where you are learning to "overcome the Evil One."

### **- Do not Love the World: 2:15-17**

Love for God and for people are the marks of a follower of Jesus. In contrast, God's people will be careful not to allow their hearts to become devoted to *"the things in the world."*

***"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. 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. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever" (2:15-17).***

In his gospel, John refers to "the world" some 55 times, and in this letter another 18 times. The "world" can mean different things to John, depending on the context. Often, as in the above passage, the "world" refers to this present world system that lies in the power of the Evil One (see 1John 5:19). It is the kingdom of Satan, standing in opposition to the kingdom of God. It is everything that the Evil One offers to us, in contrast to what Jesus offers us. Revelation 18 provides a vivid description of the world from John's prophetic perspective, as it is falling under the final judgment of God. In this letter, John is encouraging believers to be on guard against the temptation to be drawn into this world system of thinking and living. When we keep our eyes on Jesus, we can overcome the powers of this world (1Jn.5:4,5). He lists three aspects of "the world" here:

*-The lust of the flesh:* The cravings of the sinful nature, especially craving for sensual gratification. Responding to sinful impulses.

*-The lust of the eyes:* Coveting what one sees, and concern for outward appearances. Greedy longings of the mind.

*-The boastful pride of life:* Things that bring us honor and glory. Pride in being better than others. The need to prove significance or superiority.

These three categories of temptation are paralleled in two other KEY places in the Bible: the temptation of Adam and Eve, by the Devil, in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-7), and the temptation of Jesus, by the Devil, in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11).

### **C. Believing in Jesus as the God-man: 2:18-27**

The 1<sup>st</sup> cycle concludes with focus on the 3<sup>rd</sup> theme: maintaining correct beliefs about Jesus. In his gospel, John was writing to help people become believers in Jesus as the Son of God (see John 20:30,31). The *deity* of Christ was his main concern. In this letter, he is confronting later errors as to who Jesus really was, in particular with regard to the true *humanity* of Jesus as the GOD-MAN. The bottom line is that a correct view of Jesus is foundation to “believing in Him.”

#### **- False Teachers: the antichrists: 2:18,19**

False teachers (antichrists) had infiltrated the Christian churches, but then departed for some reason (perhaps to form their own groups around their errant beliefs). The fact that they “*went out from us*” proves that they were never truly “*of us*” (i.e., part of the true Christian faith). They were “*wolves in sheep’s clothing,*” as Jesus described them (Matt.7:15).

***“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. 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” (2:18,19).***

#### **- True Teacher: The Holy Spirit: 2:20-27**

In contrast to the false teachers, the Holy Spirit guides God’s people toward *truth*. Jesus repeatedly emphasized that this would be one of the Spirit’s primary works (see John 14:16,17; 25,26; 15:26,27; 16:5-15). This is the “*anointing*” that John refers to here.

***“But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know. 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. 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. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. 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. This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life. These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you. 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” (2:20-27).***

The Holy Spirit is a real person, and He lives inside of the believer. Jesus taught/reminded His disciples at His final supper with them, “*the Counselor...the Spirit of Truth... He lives WITH you and WILL be IN YOU” (John 14:15,16)*. When the Spirit senses false teachings concerning the person of Christ, the believer will experience some form counsel from the inner moving of the Spirit (grieving, correcting, convicting are all works of the Spirit) to alert the believer to the presence of lies concerning the Person and Work of Christ. John says in v.27 that they had “*no need for anyone to teach*” them concerning these basic truths. He was not saying that the Christian church has no need of teachers, for elsewhere the gift of teaching is highlighted as an important ministry in the church. Further, John’s writing of this very letter would be meaningless if there was absolutely no need for believers to be taught, warned or corrected. John was saying that they had already heard and received the true teaching about the Person and Work of Christ, and this teaching had been confirmed in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. They did not need to be re-taught these basic truths; rather, they needed to be on guard against any teachings to the contrary.

**CRUCIAL TO THEIR DAY AND OURS IS THE SAME WARNING:**

*“Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also” (2:23). John says that it is impossible to “have the Father” while denying the Person and Work of Jesus, the Son of God. The relationship between Father and Son is inseparable. God the Father has made Himself known to the world through His Son. Further, He has reconciled the world to Himself through the death and resurrection of His Son. While it is fashionable today for people to say that they believe in God, while minimizing or ignoring Jesus, this is precisely the idea John was opposing. Jesus Himself said: “He who does not honor the Son, does not honor the Father Who sent Him” (John 5:23).*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> CYCLE: 2:28 – 4:6

Now themes are repeated, but with new emphases and depth. Like a song that builds with each section, so John's three themes build with each cycle toward a crescendo.

### A. Keeping God's Commandments: 2:28-3:10

#### - Obedience leads to Confidence when Christ Returns: 2:28-3:3

The first Christians lived with a very real sense that Christ could return at any time. Thus, they lived to be ready to meet Him with confidence and to give an account for their stewardship of life. This was a theme Jesus often emphasized (see Matt.24:45 – 25:46) where, in connection with His 2<sup>nd</sup> coming discourse, Jesus gave numerous parables stressing the need to be vigilant and ready for His return).

*“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. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him. 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. 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. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (2:28-3:3).*

“Glorification” is the final stage of our deliverance from sin. This will happen when Jesus returns, or we go to be with Him through death. In the meantime, we are in the process of “sanctification” - being progressively changed to look more like Jesus. John's admonition here is simple: IF in the END we are going to be like Jesus, THEN we should be pursuing that goal of looking like Him more and more NOW.

*How does the return of Christ (or else you're going to be with Christ) impact the way you live here and now? Put differently: If you knew for a fact that Jesus was going to take you home one year from now, what would you do differently to get ready to meet Him? What would you do more of? Less of? What drastic changes would you make in your life? John said that the one who “has his hope fixed on Him will purify himself, just as He is pure.” Is your hope firmly fixed on meeting Jesus face to face someday?*

## **- Obedience assures us that we are His children: 3:4-10**

John has already stated that obedience is *evidence* of truly knowing God (2:3-6). Now he takes this idea a step further, arguing that obedience gives us *assurance* in our hearts that we truly are His children.

*“Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; 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. 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. 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” (3:4-10).*

This passage, if not translated carefully, can give the impression that a Christian will *never sin* (which John has already said is not true – see 1:8-10). The key to understanding what John is really saying here is noticing that he uses Greek *present tense* verbs repeatedly. If he had wished to say that a person never sins at all, he would have used the Greek aorist tense. But by using the present tense he is saying that the one who is truly born of God will not *keep on sinning as a way of life*. A true believer will have a *pattern* or *trajectory* of desiring to obey God, not one of desiring to sin. The added idea in this 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle is that while *obedience* assures us that we are *children of God*, a pattern of *practicing sin* assures that someone is a child of the devil.

## **B. Loving One Another: 3:11-24**

The theme of loving one another comes around the 2<sup>nd</sup> time, only with greater force. It is impossible to hate others and, at the same time, have eternal life within your heart. If you hate, then you are a murderer like Cain, who killed his brother, showing that he “*was of the Evil One*” (i.e., a child of Satan). If you love, then you assure your own heart that you are a child of God (3:19-21). Since Jesus loved us by laying down His life for us, His followers will love others by laying down their lives for them.

***“For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; 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. Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 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? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. 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” (3:11-24).***

If we are granted the capacity and resources to help another person, then true love will reach out to help in tangible ways. True Christians will love not in words and tongue, but in deed and truth.

*Who in your sphere of influence needs you to love them in deed and truth. Who can you reach out to with tangible displays of the love of Christ? Jesus’ love for us was tangible, physical, real, and sacrificial. He gave of His own resources to meet our need. How can you love like Jesus this coming week?*

### **C. Believing in Jesus as the God-man: 4:1-6**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle concludes by revisiting the issue of true belief in Jesus. False spirits will be recognized by their denial of the reality of Jesus coming “*in the flesh*.” The true Spirit of God will always point people to the truth that Jesus was, in fact, *the God-man*.

***“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit***

*that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (4:1-6).*

### Discussion Questions

1. John makes a big deal about countering false views of Jesus. Why is it so important to have a correct view of Jesus? What’s wrong with simply having our own ideas/opinions about who He was and what He did? What did you learn about the true identity of Jesus Christ in this letter?
2. The theme of obedience to God as evidence of knowing God is very important in 1John. Many times we emphasize the grace of God because we want to steer clear of the false notion of “earning our salvation” through good works/obedience. How might this emphasis on *amazing grace* keep us from seeing the importance of *obedience* in our relationship with God? Where do you need to step up your obedience?
3. Loving others is really just one form of obedience to God. So why does John single it out and make it *the key evidence* of truly knowing Jesus? Who do you need to choose to practically love? What would show love to them?