

Through the Bible Book by Book

New Testament

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EPISTLES OF JOHN

Theme: The Gospel of John sets forth the acts and words which prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; the First Epistle of John sets forth the acts and words which are obligatory upon those who believe this truth.

- The Gospel deals with the fundamentals of Christian faith; the Epistle, with fundamentals of Christian life.
- The Gospel was written to give a foundation of faith; the Epistle, to give a foundation of assurance.
- The Gospel leads us across the Father's threshold; the Epistle makes us at home in the Father's house.

The Epistle is an affectionate letter from a spiritual father to his children in the faith, in which he exhorts them to cultivate that practical godliness which brings perfect fellowship with God, and to avoid that type of religion where actions do not conform to profession. To accomplish his purpose the apostle lays down a number of rules whereby true spirituality may be tested - rules that draw a rigid line of demarcation between those who merely profess to walk in love and holiness and those who really do so.

Though John is plain-spoken and severe in dealing with erroneous doctrine and inconsistent living, yet on the whole his tone is affectionate and shows him as deserving of his title "*the apostle of love*."

The frequent recurrence of the word "**love**" and the form of address "**my little children**," makes his Epistle breathe an atmosphere of tenderness.

The following story concerning John will not be out of place in this connection. It is said that when the apostle had arrived to an extreme old age and could with difficulty be carried to the church in the arms of his disciples, and was too weak to give any lengthy exhortations, he would say no more at their meetings than this: "Little children, love one another." The disciples and fathers wearied of this constant repetition of the same words said, "Master, why dost thou always say this?" He replied, "It is the Lord's command, and if only this be done, it is enough."

We shall sum up the theme as follows: the grounds of Christian assurance and of fellowship with the Father.

Why Written: It was written for the following purposes, as stated in the Epistle itself:

1. That the child of God might have fellowship with the Father and the Son, and with one another (1:3).
2. That the child of God may have fullness of joy (1:4).
3. That he may not sin (2:1).
4. That he may recognize the grounds of his assurance of eternal life (5:13).

When Written: Probably about A. D. 90.

Where Written: Probably at Ephesus, where John lived and ministered after leaving Jerusalem.

Contents:

I. Introduction. 1:1-4.

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VII. Conclusion: Christian Confidence. 5:13-21.

Note: The quotations in this study of John are from *Pakenham-Walsh's Commentary on I John* (McMillan Co., New York).

I. Introduction. Ch. 1:1-4.

1. The substance of the Gospel: the deity, incarnation of Christ (v. 1).
2. The guarantee of the Gospel:
 - (a) The apostle's experience (v. 1). They had come into personal contact with the Word of life.
 - (b) The apostolic testimony (v. 2).
3. The purpose of preaching the Gospel (v. 3).
 - (a) That believers might have fellowship with the apostles and all Christians.
 - (b) That the believers might share in all the blessings and privileges that the apostles had gained from their fellowship with the Father.
4. The result of the Gospel: the fullness of joy that comes from perfect fellowship with God (v. 4).

II. Fellowship with God (vs. 1:5 to 2:28).

The apostle lays down the following tests of fellowship with God.

1. Walking in the light (1:5-7).

"There were false teachers in John's days, who were trying to induce Christians to leave the church and join their heretical body. Among other things, they taught that if a man's mind were enlightened with heavenly knowledge, it did not at all matter what his conduct was like; he might commit as much sin as he pleased. John says that such doctrine would overthrow all holiness and truth, and was utterly opposed to Christianity.

“So he makes it very clear in this section that, far from its being true that all conduct is alike to the enlightened man, it is the character of his conduct that will show whether he is enlightened or not.” God is light; i.e., He is the fountain of pure truth, pure intelligence, pure holiness. He who is walking in the darkness of willful sin, lies when he says that he has fellowship with such a Being.

2. Consciousness and confession of sin (1:8 to 2:1).

To claim sinless perfection, or, on the other hand, to deny the sinfulness of certain bodily acts (as did the Antinomians) is to deceive ourselves and to give the lie to God’s revelation. It is God’s will that we should not sin. When God’s light reveals sin in us we are to confess it and obtain that cleansing which the blood of Jesus and His intercession for us makes possible.

3. Obedience to God’s commands in imitation of Christ (2:2-6).

“The false teachers maintained that knowledge was the one and all-important thing; if a man were enlightened with what they considered the knowledge of love, it did not matter how he lived. John wishes to show that such knowledge is a delusion; that all true knowledge of God must result in holiness of life, otherwise it is a dead and useless thing. He therefore bids men test their knowledge of God, and if they want to know for certain whether they have the knowledge of God, the test is simple - do they keep God’s commandments?”

4. Love to the brethren (2:7-11).

John is writing an old-new commandment; old, because they heard it when they first became Christians; new, because it is fresh and living to those who have fellowship with Christ, the true Light now shining for them.

5. Unworldliness (vv. 12-17).

A Christian cannot love God and love the world at the same time - the world, disordered by the unrestrained prevalence of sinful forces and fettered in the bondage of corruption.

6. Pure doctrine (2:18-28).

The believers have heard of Antichrist who will come at the end of this, the last age. But his spirit is in the world at the present time in the person of certain false teachers who deny the Deity and Messiahship of Christ.

The Christian need not be led astray by the subtle and plausible arguments of these errorists, for the Spirit would lead them into all truth.

“There is an undoubted allusion here to a false teacher, Cerinthus, who denied that Jesus was the Christ and held that the man Jesus and the aeon or spirit, Christ, were distinct beings. He taught that Jesus was an ordinary man till His baptism when this ‘aeon’ descended upon Him, gave Him the power of working miracles and revealed to Him the hitherto unknown Father. This aeon, being incapable of suffering, left Jesus before His passion.

“Hence the two central truths of the incarnation and the atonement were denied by this teaching . . . These false teachers were continually saying to the Christians, ‘You have need of a great deal of instruction; follow us and we will lead you into the depths of Christian faith. We know the hidden mysteries and can teach you who have need of teaching.’ John reminds the Christians of their anointing, of the presence in their midst of the divine Teacher, the Holy Spirit . . . Having the Holy Spirit, they needed no other teacher, and they might boldly claim this unction in the face of the haughty teachers of error. He does not mean to say that they needed no Christian teacher, no instruction from the lips of an apostle or teacher in the church. (See Ephesians 4:11; Hebrews 5:12).

III. Divine Sonship. Chs. 2:29 to 3:24.

The following tests of divine sonship are laid down by John:

1. A righteous walk (2:29 to 3:10).

The Christian is to show an absolute antagonism to sin because of the following facts:

- (a) His divine sonship and the hope of becoming like Jesus. 2:29 to 3:1-3.
- (b) Sin is lawlessness (transgression of the law) - in essence, rebellion against God. 3:4.
- (c) Because of Christ’s character and His atoning work for us (vv.5-7). So far as we abide in Christ we do not sin; so far as we sin we do not abide in Christ.
- (d) Because of the diabolical origin of sin (v. 8).
- (e) Because of the God-begotten quality of the Christian life (v. 9).
- (f) Because the final test as to whether we are children of God or children of the devil lies in our actions (v. 10).

2. Love to the brethren. 3:11-18.

- (a) The command (v. 11).
- (b) The warning (v. 12).
- (c) The consolation (vv. 13-15).
- (d) The pattern (v. 16).
- (e) The practical illustration (vv. 17, 18). “Actions speak louder than words.”

3. Assurance. 3:19-24.

- (a) The basis of assurance (v. 19).

The practice of God-inspired love toward the brethren, and not only our feelings which are variable, is the test of the reality of our faith and our union with Christ.

- (b) The results of assurance (vv. 20-24).

IV. The Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Error. Ch.4:1-6.

The thought of the Spirit dwelling in us (3:24) leads John to treat in a parenthesis of other spirits - false and evil spirits and how Christians may distinguish them.

1. The appeal (v. 1). However eloquent and gifted a prophet may be, his teaching is to be tested.
2. The test (v. 2) - the confession of Christ's incarnation.

"This all has a special bearing on our own days, when there is so much heard of spiritualism, theosophy, and the communications of men with spirits and with the spiritual world . . . The test proposed by John may be applied as surely and certainly today as ever; there is one 'medium' of spiritual communication between the invisible and the visible world, between heaven and earth, that is Jesus Christ come in the flesh. All true spirits will unite themselves to Him; all untrue ones will deny, setting themselves up (whether they are clothed in human bodies or not) as independent mediums, creating intercourse between heaven and earth."

3. The conflict (v. 4).

There had evidently been a conflict between Christians and false teachers, but the Church had adhered to the truth. Their victory is our victory today.

4. The contrast (vv. 5, 6).

Those possessed by the Spirit of God attract disciples similar to themselves, earnest men filled with spirit and doing righteousness; the others attract disciples similar to themselves, worldly men whose lives are evil.

V. God Is Love. Ch. 4:7-21.

1. The call to love (v. 7).
2. The reason for love: "**God is love**" (v. 8).
3. The proof of divine love: God's sacrifice (vv. 9, 10).
4. The claim of love: God's love toward us calls for love on our part toward our brethren (v. 11).
5. The result of love on our part: the manifestation of God's presence (vv. 12-16); boldness (v. 17); absence of condemning fear (v. 18).
6. The proof of our love: the proof of our love for the invisible God is the love for our brother who is made and renewed in God's image (vv. 19-21); the proof of our true love for the brethren is found in our love for God (5:1, 2); our love for God finds its manifestation in the keeping of His commandments. (v. 3).

VI. Faith. Ch. 5:4-12.

1. The victory of faith (5:4, 5) "**And this is the victory that overcomes the world.**"

"John uses great boldness in speaking of the victory as past. In each believer there is a power of life from God, exercised by faith which must conquer, which from God's point of view has conquered. In the body of believers, the church of God, there is the same power for the ultimate conquest of the world. When John wrote, the church was a despised, insignificant sect, consisting chiefly of slaves and poor low-caste people; it was far from perfect; it was vexed with false teachers; the world was the solid, united, irresistible heathen power of Rome, commanding all the wealth, the strength and resources of civilization. And yet John not merely prophesied that the church would conquer the world, but asserted that it had done so.

“And further his words imply that the complete conquest of all the evil that remains in ourselves, of all the evil that exists in the world, of every system of falsehood or wickedness which fights against God, is assured, and from the divine standpoint accomplished.”

2. The threefold earthly witness of faith (vv. 6-8).

- (a) The water witnesses to the beginning of Christ’s earthly ministry inaugurated by His baptism.
- (b) The blood witnesses to His death which brought eternal redemption.
- (c) The Spirit witnesses in all ages to His resurrection and endless life.

Notice the emphasis in verse 6; “**not by water only, but by water and blood.**” Cerinthus, John’s chief opponent, taught that the heavenly Christ descended upon Jesus at His baptism but left Him on the eve of His passion; so that Jesus died, but the Christ, being spiritual, did not suffer. That is, that Christ came by water (baptism), but that he did not come by blood (death).

The apostle’s object is to prove that He who was baptized and He who died on Calvary was the same person.

4. The heavenly witness (vv. 9-12).

VII. Conclusion: Christian Confidence. Ch. 5:13-21.

- 1. The substance of the Christian confidence - the assurance of eternal life (v. 13).
- 2. The manifestation of Christian confidence.

- (a) Outwardly the power of offering effectual prayer (vv. 14:17).
- (b) Inward conviction-“**We know**” (vv. 18-20).

3. Concluding exhortation (v. 21).

“In Jesus you have found Him who is the true God and eternal life. If you are in Him that is true, you are bound carefully and earnestly to make a complete chasm between yourselves and all heathen things, and now shun the idols which you once worshiped.”

- Schlatter.

SECOND JOHN (Read the Epistle)

Theme: The First Epistle of John is a letter to the Christian family in general, warning against false teaching and exhorting to practical godliness.

The second Epistle is a letter to a particular member of that family, written for the purpose of instructing her as to her attitude toward false teachers. She was not to show hospitality to such.

Such an injunction may sound harsh; but it was justified on the grounds that the doctrines of these teachers struck at the very fundamentals of Christianity, and in many cases menaced purity of conduct.

By receiving such in her house, the believer to whom John was writing would be identifying herself with their errors. John did not mean to teach unkind treatment of Christians who happen to differ from us doctrinally, or of those ensnared by error. He was writing at a time when Antinomian and Gnostic errorists were attempting to undermine the foundation of faith and purity, and under such conditions it was imperative that Christians denounce their teachings both in word and in attitude.

The theme may be summed up as follows: the duty of obeying the truth and avoiding fellowship with its enemies.

Why Written: To warn a hospitable Christian lady against entertaining false teachers.

THIRD JOHN (Read the Epistle)

Theme: This short Epistle gives us a glimpse of certain conditions that existed in a local church in John's time.

The story which may be gathered from the Epistle seems to be as follows. John had sent out a band of itinerant teachers with letters of commendation to the various churches, one of which was the Assembly to which Gaius and Diotrephes belonged. Diotrephes, either from jealousy for the rights of the local church or for some personal reason, refused to tender hospitality to these teachers and excommunicated those members of his church who received them. Gaius, one of the members of the church, refused to be intimidated by this spiritual autocrat, and entertained the repulsed and disheartened missionaries, who later reported his kindness to the apostle.

It seems that John was about to send forth a second time these teachers (v. 6) and he exhorts Gaius to continue in his ministry of love toward them.

John himself wrote a letter of remonstrance to Diotrephes, which was ignored. Therefore the apostle expressed intention of paying a personal visit to the church and of deposing this ecclesiastical tyrant.

We shall sum up the theme as follows: the duty of hospitality toward the ministry, and the danger of domineering leadership.

Why Written: To commend Gaius for entertaining those Christian workers who were entirely dependent on the hospitality of believers, and to denounce the inhospitable, tyrannical attitude of Diotrephes.

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