



Catalog No. 713

1 John 1:1-4

First Message

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WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?

SERIES: LIVING CONFIDENTLY IN THE LIGHT

I can hardly believe that the holiday season is upon us! I love Thanksgiving. Out of all of the holidays, this is one of my favorites because it reminds me to slow down and focus on the things that really matter: family, friends, football. There is an immense need in our world for simplifying our lives. High-tech times lead to high-stress tension. I have especially been thinking about simplifying my life these past few weeks because of the birth of our third child, Timothy Michael. There is nothing like a newborn to remind us of what is important.

Some time ago, a member of our body mailed me an article by Robert Fulghum entitled "All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" which caused me to remember to simplify. It reads:

Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not found at the top of the graduate school mountain but there in the sand box at nursery school.

These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt someone. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you... Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the plastic cup. The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the plastic cup—they all die. So do we.

And then remember the book about Dick and Jane and the first word you learned, the biggest word of all: LOOK. Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and sane living.

Think of what a better world it would be if all of us—the whole world—had cookies and milk about 3:00 every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap. Or if we had a basic policy in our nation and other nations to always put things back where we found them and cleaned up our own messes. And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

Although most of us laugh and consider this childishly naive, it contains a refreshing note for our high-tech age. In spite of our increase in knowledge, the end of the twentieth century is certainly a period of confusion and uncertainty. Everything is changing. Nothing is certain. Dogmatism is out, free thought is in.

Our world puts a high premium on knowledge and on the confidence it is supposed to bring. But our knowledge has outstripped the ability of most people to absorb it. Our areas of specialty change

so rapidly that what was once valid during our college years becomes outmoded before we enter middle age. Can a person really know anything for certain in such circumstances? Are there any absolutes? Is there anything that will be true not only today, but tomorrow and the day after that as well?

It is against this backdrop that we open the book of 1 John and enter another world altogether. This letter is filled with assurance, confidence, and boldness. The major theme of the book is living confidently. It expresses our certainty, a certainty that Christianity is true and that we as Christians possess eternal life.

The author of this epistle is the apostle John. When he wrote it, he was an old man, and all the other disciples had already died. Only he remained. His long life had afforded him the opportunity to witness the spectacular growth of the church which had begun with only a handful of disciples clustered together in Jerusalem. Now it had spread throughout the known world, and believers had become so numerous it was difficult to count them.

But not all that John had seen was good. As well as growth, there had been dissension, defection, and heresy—even in the churches John had pastored. In fact, one group of people had become involved in a strange doctrine, had left the church, and were trying to persuade other Christians to do the same. Thus, John was compelled to write this letter because he saw it was vital that the church understand clearly what lay at the heart of Christianity. It was vital that Christians grasp firmly the nature of the gospel they had received.

In this wonderful, brief epistle John distills all the wisdom and insight of his long years into a few incisive chapters. John's desire is to make it simple. Although the letter is an amazing piece of theological truth, his focus is always on the basic issues. Possessing a well-developed vocabulary (clearly seen in his gospel and in Revelation), he purposely uses a simple vocabulary in this book. (In fact this is the book first-year Greek students always translate.) John is constantly trying to boil down to the root issues. He defines what C. S. Lewis called "mere Christianity." As one scholar put it, "The writer is occupied with a small number of thoughts which he feels to be the profoundest significance and which he presents again and again." This epistle contains the essence of Christ's teachings.

One major purpose of the letter is to bring Christians to absolute assurance of their salvation. We see this clearly in the last chapter where John says: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13). John is going to show us through a series of tests how we can know for sure that we are Christians.

This is in contrast to John's gospel which has as its purpose to lead unbelievers into faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. John tells us in the last chapter of his gospel that there were many other things that Jesus did which were not recorded, "but these have been written that you

may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:31).

I saw this just three weeks ago when a young man came up to me in tears after our Newcomers Class. He told me that the truth was convicting him, and I could tell that he was in the process of becoming a Christian. I challenged him to read the Gospel of John. A week later he called me and told me he had asked the Lord Jesus into his life. He said, “When I began to read, I realized Jesus was a real person who really lived. Having faced that, I had to come to grips with what He said and who He was.” The purpose of the gospel of John was fulfilled in his life.

In this first epistle, John’s purpose is to lead those who already believe into a deeper understanding of the faith and into a confidence in what they already possess. This is my prayer for you in the coming weeks. As we study this book, I pray that you will be more assured, more confident and bolder than you have ever been in all your Christian life.

John begins his letter with a brief prologue that is similar to the prologue of his gospel. You may have already noted that the opening of this letter is unusual in that it lacks any salutation or personal reference. In fact, if you have a correct rendering, you will notice that the main verb does not appear until verse 3. This is awkward grammar, but it has a purpose. John wants us to be more concerned with the object of the proclamation than with the proclamation itself.

In these first four verses, we have the eternal purpose of God unfolded for us. These verses capture the essential nature of Christianity. We have described for us what Christianity is along with its purpose. Let us look at the nature of the message described for us in the first two verses.

I. The Nature of the Message

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us— (1 John 1:1-2 NASB)

There are two observations I would like to make from these verses about the essential nature of our message. The first one is found in the first verse.

A. The Essence of Christianity is Life in the Person of Jesus Christ

The most important thing John has to say in his preface is that Christianity is Jesus Christ. This is our message. It is not a system of thought which is at the core of our belief. What Christianity has, apart from any other systems of belief, is life in the person of Jesus Christ—the One who is the Creator and Sustainer of all life and who is the light of all men (John 1:4).

This is why becoming a Christian has nothing to do with joining a church, believing a certain creed, or signing a doctrinal statement. Becoming a Christian is to be related to a person. Just as two-week old Timothy Michael became a member of my family because he shares my life, so a Christian becomes a member of God’s family because he shares God’s life in the person of his Son. Christianity is life. John later says, “He who has the Son of God has life. He who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” It is that simple! Just because you are breathing does not mean you are living. No

matter how religious you might be, you do not have life if you do not possess the Son of God.

It is Christ who is proclaimed in Christianity. John makes two important statements about Jesus in these first two verses.

1. He Was Eternally Pre-existent

John says the apostles proclaimed he who “was from the beginning.” This phrase is parallel to the expression in verse two, “the eternal life which was with the Father.” This is also similar to the beginning of John’s gospel where John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.” John’s point is that Jesus has always existed. Since only divine beings pre-exist, John’s point is to affirm the deity of Christ.

But his emphasis is on a second point.

2. He Was Historically Manifested

There is an dramatic contrast between that first relative clause, “what was from the beginning,” and the next three. The amazing truth that we will celebrate in the coming weeks is that the Eternal entered time and was manifested to men. The Word became flesh and presented himself to the three higher senses of man.

First, they *heard* him. What wonderful words they heard! You have read many of the words Jesus spoke. In John 7:46, the officers who were sent to arrest Jesus testified, “No one ever spoke the way this man does.” Those who heard him were privileged. In Matthew 13:16-17, Jesus declared, “Blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, but did not see it; and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”

Not only did they hear him, they *saw* him. This was the second channel by which men gained knowledge of Christ. Of all the words related to our senses, this appears to be the most important to John for he repeats it four times in the first three verses.

Why would this be so important? I think I know why.

In chapter 20 of the gospel of John, John uses the same word to describe the moment of his own conversion. This chapter records the events of the morning of the resurrection. Mary arose early in the morning and ran to the tomb. When she found the gigantic stone rolled away, she ran to tell Peter and John. They raced back to the tomb. Since John was younger than Peter, he arrived first. He stopped at the door, stooped down and looked in, and he “saw” the linen bands in which the body of Jesus had been wrapped. This word is the most common Greek word for seeing. It indicates only that the object had impressed itself on John’s eyes. From what we know of the circumstances, it may even be that John could not see the linen cloths too well, for he was outside and they were in shadow.

In a few moments, Peter arrived. He had always been more forceful than John; so, true to character, he pushed John aside and entered the tomb. The author tells us that Peter also “saw” the linen cloths, but John uses a different word this time. This word means “to behold with intelligence, to perceive, to scrutinize.” Apparently, there was something about the grave clothes that caused Peter to puzzle over them. For one thing, they were still there. If the body had been stolen, the bands would presumably have been moved with it. Moreover, the bands were lying in order just where the body had been. If the body had been unwrapped, for whatever inconceivable reason, the strips of cloth would have scattered all over and the spices spilled. Finally, the disciples noticed that the napkin that had been around the head was not with the other grave clothes but was in a

place by itself. That is, it was lying precisely where it had been when it was around the head of Jesus, in accordance with Jewish practices of embalming. What would account for the presence and the arrangement of the grave clothes? Nothing but a resurrection in which the transformed body of Jesus would have passed through the linen cloths leaving them undisturbed.

At this point, the significance of the grave clothes got through to John, for he tells us that he “saw” and he believed. This is the third word for seeing and means “to see with understanding.” It is this last word that John uses three times in the preface of his epistle. Others might doubt, but at least he had seen Jesus with an insight that led to belief.

They also *touched* him. This is the third channel through which John gained knowledge of Christ. He “handled” him. This word means “to feel after or to grope,” as a blind person might do. It also means “to examine closely.” Jesus was no phantom. He was a real person. It is possible that John was thinking of the Lord’s invitation to his disciples after the resurrection to come and touch him. In Luke 24:39, he said, “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

This is our message. It is life in a person—eternally pre-existent and historically manifested. As G. Campbell Morgan put it in *The Crises of the Christ*:

He was the God-man. Not God indwelling a man. Of such there have been many. Not a man deified. Of such there have been none save in the myths of pagan systems of thought; but God and man, combining in one Personality the two natures, a perpetual enigma and mystery, baffling the possibility of explanation.

John’s words were a strong statement against false teachers of his day, and of ours as well. Our message is life centered in a person. He who was from the beginning is he whom the apostles heard, saw and touched. You cannot distinguish between Jesus and the Christ, the historical and the eternal. They are the same person—God and man.

This knowledge is critical today for there are many contemporary teachers who would regard much of the gospels as myths. But you cannot mythicize the incarnation. C. S. Lewis’ words in his classic book *Mere Christianity* speak clearly to this issue and reinforce John’s words:

I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.

This is our message: life in a person. This is the essence of Christianity. In its purest form, Christianity is nothing more than seeing Jesus. As Peter put it in his epistle, “We were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

This leads us to our second observation from these verses.

B. This Life Is Validated in the Apostles’ Proclamation

The historical manifestation of the eternal life was proclaimed, not monopolized. The revelation was given to the few for the many. The apostles were to dispense the message to the world. The manifestation unto us becomes a proclamation unto you.

John uses two words to describe the apostolic announcement: “to bear witness” and “to proclaim.” The apostolic ministry involved both a testimony and a proclamation.

Both words imply an authority but each carries a different kind. “To bear witness” is based upon the authority of experience. This activity only belongs to an eyewitness. A person must be a witness before he is competent to bear witness. The true witness only speaks of what he has heard and seen for himself, never of what he has gathered second hand. “To proclaim” carries the authority of a commission. The experience is personal, the commission is derived. In order to witness, the apostles must have seen and heard Christ for themselves; in order to proclaim, they must have received a commission from him.

Jesus not only manifested himself to the disciples to qualify them as eyewitnesses, he also gave them an authoritative commission as apostles to preach the gospel. Possessing these credentials, John is very bold. Having heard, seen, and touched the Lord Jesus, he bears witness to him. Having received a commission directly from him, he proclaims the gospel with authority.

This is critical because it is important for us to realize that the message we have received is not a philosophical speculation or a tentative suggestion. Nor is it a modest contribution to the world of religion. The message we have is a dogmatic affirmation of the truth by those whose experience and commission qualified them to make it. Their proclamation is preserved for us in the writings which have become the New Testament. Today, we are to take these writings, and having entered into the experience of the apostles through them, we are to proclaim the same message to the world. This life is validated in the proclamation of the apostles.

Now, why was this done? John concludes his preface by giving us the objective of this proclamation in verses 3-4.

II. The Purpose of the Proclamation

...what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. (1:3-4)

John says this life will result in two wonderful things. The proclamation is not an end in itself. Its purpose, both immediate and ultimate, is now defined.

A. The Immediate Purpose is Fellowship

The intimacy which was created by Christ with his disciples when he was on the earth, and was deepened by the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, was not to be limited to them. It was to extend to every generation.

It is interesting to me that John does not say, “We write these things to you that you may have fellowship with the Father.” Rather, he says, “We write these things that you may have fellowship with us.” The immediate purpose of the gospel is not salvation but fellowship. When properly understood, this is the meaning of salvation. The essence of salvation is the restoration of relationships. “Fellow-

ship” means to have things in common. What we possess in common is the life of God.

John’s words are an echo of the Lord Jesus’ prayer in the garden: “That they may all be one...that they may be in us” (John 17:21). Our horizontal oneness depends on our vertical oneness. Thus, John adds the phrase, “indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” Fellowship with one another is impossible without fellowship with the Father and the Son. The restoration of relationships is the essence of Christianity.

I think these verses are a rebuke to much of our modern evangelism and church life. We are too often content with an evangelism that does not lead others into a deep fellowship with the Father or into a deep communion with one another. But this is the essence of Christianity.

Some of you have heard about the time I first experienced this kind of intimacy while I was attending seminary. One night, four of my friends and I went out for dessert. I was taking a group dynamics class at the time and decided to share some of the class exercises with them. There was such an atmosphere of honesty, concern and acceptance, that we began to be more vulnerable with each other. And we shared things which we had never shared with anyone else before: confessions of sins, fears, and dreams. This became so exciting, we stopped using the exercises and just continued sharing. When we left the coffee shop, it was 7:00 the next morning! We had been sharing for almost ten hours. To this day, those four men are my closest friends. Although we no longer live near one another, we have met together every year for the past 14 years. When we get together there is always a renewed openness and intimacy. This past summer we attended a Mount Hermon Family Camp together. After we put our children to bed, each evening we would meet to examine each other’s marriage, to encourage and exhort one another. It was a wonderfully healing time.

This is what God desires for our fellowship. Listen to what Keith Miller says:

The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give His church. It’s an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality, but it is a permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets and they usually don’t tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers.

With all my heart I believe that Christ wants His church to be...a fellowship where people can come in and say, “I’m sunk!” “I’m beat!” “I’ve had it!”

My friends, the church is not a cathedral! It is to be a hospital! God is in the process of restoring relationships. Let me be specific. Where do you go when the bottom drops out of your life? Who cares enough to listen when you cry? Who affirms you when you feel rotten?

What if your spouse is an alcoholic? Or if your son tells you he’s a practicing homosexual? What if your husband walks out, or if he is sexually abusing your two daughters? Or you?

Who can you turn to if you just got fired? Or you just got out of jail? Or when your 16-year-old daughter tells you that she is pregnant? Or after you beat your children and you are afraid and ashamed? Or when you can’t cope with your drug habit any longer? Or if you need professional help because you are near an emotional breakdown?

Do you know what you need? A place of refuge! You need a friend who can listen to you and reintroduce you to the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. The immediate purpose of the proclamation is fellowship.

John then gives us the ultimate purpose which is a by-product of restored relationships.

B. The Ultimate Purpose is Joy

The fellowship with one another, based on a fellowship with the Father and Son, issues itself in fullness of joy. Fullness of joy is a common expression in John’s writings. I believe it is significant that in every case where it is used there is an allusion to fellowship with God or with each other.

Joy is the fruit of restored relationships, for joy and love are related. Jesus said to his disciples, “Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. This is My commandment that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:9-12). To experience the love of God and realize that God is using you to love another person is to experience joy.

Do you remember the first time you experienced that joy, when you felt God using you to love another person? That is what life is meant to be! If you experience this, you will never want to live life in any other way. This is why I enjoyed taking our high school students to Mexico year after year. I wanted them to taste what it was like to be used by God in another person’s life. Once that happens, you will never be the same. Some of you have already experienced this.

Life is meant to be lived in fellowship, and joy is the fruit of restored relationships. This is our message: life centered in a person, a life that produces fellowship and joy. We were never meant to dwell in the fog of this world with no vision of our Creator. This is why God came near—to be seen. And this is why those who saw him were never the same.

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Catalog No. 714

1 John 1:5–2:2

Second Message

Gary Vanderet

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WALKING IN LIGHT

SERIES: LIVING CONFIDENTLY IN THE LIGHT

Have you ever been afraid of the dark? When I was a boy, my older brother tried to convince me that everything in the dark was the same as it was in the light, but I did not believe him because I could never trust him. One of the challenges of being a father has been to reassure my two sons that the dark is nothing to be feared. This is probably why I fell in love with Judith Viorst's book *My Mama Says There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins, or Things*. Listen to this excerpt:

My mama says there isn't any mean-eyed monster with long slimy hair and pointy claws going scritch-scratch, scritch-scratch-scratch outside my window. But yesterday my mama said I couldn't have some cream cheese on my sandwich, because, she said, there wasn't any more. And then I found the cream cheese under the lettuce in back of the Jello. So, sometimes even mamas make mistakes. My mama says that a vampire isn't flying over my house with his red and black vampire cape and his vampire f-f-f-fangs. But how could I believe her when she said my wiggly tooth would fall out Thursday, and then it stayed till Sunday after lunch.

The absence of physical light in a room can do strange things to a child's mind. The absence of spiritual light in a life can do the same thing. I am convinced that there are many among us whose lives and minds have been affected by darkness. One of the amazing things that happens is that instead of being afraid of the dark we become afraid of the light. I am sure that is where some of you are today. It is my prayer that as a result of our study, you will allow God to help you step out of your darkness and into his light.

John began his letter by stating that one of the purposes for writing this letter is to enable his readers to enter into fellowship, to know the joy of restored relationships. He now proceeds to deduce from the nature of God the conditions under which fellowship with God is possible. In verse 5 of chapter 1, John reveals the nature of God. Then from verse 6 to the second verse of chapter 2, John deduces from that nature the conditions for this fellowship.

John begins by summarizing the apostolic message in one sentence in verse 5.

I. Summarizing the Apostolic Message (1:5)

And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5 NASB)

We learned last week that the essence of Christianity is life in the person of Jesus Christ. In this passage, John sums up the life of Jesus Christ in one sentence: "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." His life is his message. This message was not invented by John; but is what he heard from Jesus. This verse is probably not a direct statement by Jesus but a summarization of his teaching. This was the message of his life, what Jesus came to tell us.

Positively, John says, "God is light." Negatively, he says, "In him, there is no darkness." This echoes John's words in the first chapter of his gospel: "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overpower it." Later in chapter 8, he recorded that Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John also explained, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."

Of all the statements about the essential Being of God, none is more comprehensive than this one. It is God's nature to reveal himself, just as it is the property of light to shine. What he reveals about himself is his perfect purity and unutterable majesty. We are to think of God as a personal being, infinite and transcendent yet desiring to be known because he has revealed himself. Many of the errors of the false teachers of John's days were due to their ignorance of God's self-revelation of being light, a God in whom there was no darkness at all. He has no shadows or secrecy, no special cliques.

Light and darkness are used metaphorically in Scripture in two primary ways. Intellectually, light is seen as truth and darkness as ignorance or error. The psalmist declares, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." Morally, light symbolizes purity and darkness evil. Isaiah declares, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness."

We can see this double use of the symbolism throughout John's gospel. Both he and Jesus himself constantly refer to Jesus as light. Jesus used both of these symbols, the intellectual and the moral, when he healed the man who was born blind. He made the point that the effect of light was not just to make men see, but to enable them to walk. Right conduct, not just clear vision, is the benefit bestowed by light. In Scripture, truth, like light, has a moral content. Men are not just to know the truth, but to do it. Just as they are not only to see the light, but to walk in it.

Having revealed the nature of God, John now deduces the conditions we are to meet if we are to have fellowship with this light.

II. Understanding the Implications of the Message (1:6–2:2)

In these verses, John exposes and contradicts three of the claims of the false teachers. Each claim is introduced with the phrase "if we say" in verses 6, 8 and 10. The symmetry of the verses is evident. First, he introduces the false teaching with "if we say." Then he contradicts it with an unequivocal statement such as "we lie." Finally, he makes a positive, true statement corresponding to the error he has refuted.

There are two major points we can make from these verses. Both result from our understanding that God is light. One states the problem. The other gives the solution. First, we are given the human problem.

A. The Human Problem: We Are Sinners

All three of these errors deal with this critical point. The three errors concern: the fact of sin in our conduct, its origin in our nature, and its consequence in our relationship to God. They are the misconceptions of men who want fellowship with God on easy terms and who have never learned the inseparable relationship of religion and ethics. As a result, these men have an inadequate doctrine of sin and its seriousness.

In each case, John faces the problem of sin and then proceeds to state the solution. He not only denies the erroneous view but indicates the divine remedy which is offered if men will acknowledge their need of it. He also describes the cleansing and forgiveness which God has made possible through the death of Jesus Christ His Son. Christianity is the only religion which, while emphasizing God is light, first insists on taking sin seriously and then offers a satisfactory moral solution to the problem.

As we look at these false claims, you may find that you believe one of them yourself. As you examine the truth John declares, you will find hope for your situation. The first false claim is presented in verses 6-7.

1. False Claim #1: Sin Does Not Break My Fellowship with God

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. (1:6-7)

The first false claim is the assertion that we can have fellowship with God while walking, or habitually living, in darkness. Walking in darkness is ignoring the sin in our lives.

Some of the false teachers were guilty of this error in John's day. The early gnostics thought of the body as a mere envelope covering the human spirit, and they maintained that the spirit was impenetrable. In other words, nothing you did with your body could affect your spirit. There are many who still believe this today. John says we ought to be suspicious of those who claim a mystical intimacy with God and yet walk in the darkness of error and sin. Religion without morality is an illusion.

If we make such a claim, John says we are deliberately and knowingly lying. We are not practicing the truth. That is, we not only contradict the truth in our words, we deny it with our inconsistent lives.

Having refuted the error, John gives the solution. Instead of walking in darkness, we can walk in the light. In fact, we are to do this "as He Himself is in the light." God is in the light because he is always true to himself, and his activity is always consistent with his nature. We must walk in the light of his holiness and his truth, without deceit or dishonesty and without consciously tolerating sin in our conduct.

Walking in the light does not mean behaving perfectly. It is not a state of sinlessness. If that were true, we would not need cleansing. Rather, walking in the light involves honesty and sincerity, having nothing to conceal and not trying to hide anything. It is allowing the light of truth to penetrate our lives. It means taking down our defenses and facades and opening up to others, admitting what we are really going through. It is opening up the hidden closets of our lives. Walking in light means we are the same on the inside as we profess on the outside. As James exhorts us, "Confess your sins to

one another so that you may be healed." When we walk in the light, we no longer hide anything or try to defend ourselves before the light of God. We are real.

A few years ago, newspapers carried the tragic story of the murder of eight-year-old Chris Dilullo. The death actually occurred in 1984 when it had been reported that Chris drowned in lake at a country club while hunting for golf balls. His three friends told police that he had slipped in the pond, and they thought he was playing a trick on them. But they were hiding a secret. Almost two years later, the fifteen-year-old who pushed Chris into the water confessed his guilt to a friend.

That two-year period of darkness took an incredible toll on all three of the boys. The paper reported, "Since the drowning, all three witnesses have suffered emotional instability, according to their parents, police, and their own stories. Their distraught parents say the boys are withdrawn and have nightmares. They are no longer friends." Unconfessed sin always destroys fellowship. The paper went on to say that one of the boys "began crying frequently after Chris' death and had to sleep with his mother... Once he cut his head when he ran full speed into a dumpster." The second boy was fired from a job "because he would stay home from work on days when he felt 'angry and disgusted' about telling a lie to protect a friend." The third boy started "hearing voices and seeing visions and barely talked to his parents." He later entered a hospital for emotionally disturbed children.

That is a tragic example of walking in darkness and is especially vivid and heart-wrenching because it involves youngsters who are not as adept as adults in handling their secrets. But the toll is just as severe. Some of you know that same loneliness. You know the energy you expend in covering up your darkness. You know the fear you experience, and the prison you have created.

Yet we can have freedom when those secrets are exposed and when we walk out of the darkness into the light. John says there are two wonderful results of this openness and honesty. The first is fellowship with one another. Immediately, we become approachable, the walls come down and others can identify with us. We are much easier to live with because we are no longer blaming, demanding or criticizing.

The amazing thing is that the opposite of what we expect to happen takes place. Instead of judging us when we confess sin, others love and accept us. Have you ever experienced that in a group? I have, many times! I have been in meetings when someone finally risks being vulnerable. Instantly, the walls come down and there is a new sense of intimacy, acceptance and reality. God created us to have fellowship. It is dependent upon being open and honest with one another.

The second result is the assurance of forgiveness. When we are honest, we begin to experience the sweet relief of the cleansing grace of God that always accompanies walking in the light. Why? Because the blood of Jesus cannot cleanse excuses, only sins.

There is a second false claim found in verses 8-9.

2. False Claim #2: Sin Does Not Exist in My Nature

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. (1:8-9)

The second claim is worse than the first. It says, “We have no sin.” The first claim conceded the existence of sin but denied it had the effect of excluding the sinner from fellowship with God. Now the very fact of sin is denied. The word “sin” in the singular refers to the inherited principle of sin—our sin nature or self-centeredness. John says that to say we have no sin is to deceive ourselves. Not only do we fail to practice the truth, we are void of it. If we possessed the truth, we would be aware of our sinfulness.

This type of thinking is prominent in our world. It is found in the religious beliefs of Christian Science, Hinduism and Buddhism and is central in non-religious ideas such as the New Age movement. Unfortunately, it is also found in Christians who excuse evil because of physiological, psychological or social reasons. They believe that in order to deal with the problem we simply need to make an adjustment in our thinking. We only need to think more positively.

But the Scriptures have a different viewpoint. In fact, they say the problem started much earlier in our lives. A few years back, I read a report by the Minnesota Crime Commission regarding rising crime rates. They came to a startling conclusion:

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it—his bottle, his mother’s attention, his playmate’s toy, his uncle’s watch. Deny him these once, and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness which would be murderous were he not so helpless. He is dirty, he has no morals, no knowledge, no skills. This means that all children—not just certain children, all children—are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free rein to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal—a thief, a killer, or a rapist.

Those are true words coming from a secular organization! Sin is a serious problem. This is why the ark-builder got drunk, why a leader lost his temper, why a king committed adultery and murder, and why a disciple denied the Lord. As Paul put it in Romans 7, “Though I wish to do good, evil is present within me.” John Stott put it this way in *Involvement: Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society*:

We human beings have both a unique dignity as creatures made in God’s image and a unique depravity as sinners under his judgment. The former gives us hope; the latter places a limit on our expectations. Our Christian critique of the secular mind is that it tends to be either too naively optimistic or too negatively pessimistic in its estimates of the human condition, whereas the Christian mind, firmly rooted in biblical realism, both celebrates the glory and deplors the shame of our human being. We can behave like God in whose image we are made, only to descend to the level of the beasts. We are able to think, choose, create, love, and worship, but also to refuse to think, to choose evil, to destroy, to hate, and to worship ourselves. We build churches and drop bombs. We develop intensive care units for the critically ill and use the same technology to torture political enemies who presume to disagree with us. This is “man”, a strange bewildering paradox, dust of earth and breath of God, shame and glory.

To say that we have no sin is to deceive ourselves. The correct attitude is not to deny sin but to admit it and receive the forgiveness that God has made possible and promises to us. If we confess our sins, acknowledging before God that we are sinners both in nature and practice, God will both “forgive us our sins...and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Sin is a debt that he remits. It is also a stain which he removes. In both, God is said to be faithful and righteous, for God is faithful

to his covenant promises. In Jeremiah 31:34, in promising the new covenant, God said, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” This forgiveness and cleansing, however, are conditional upon our confession.

John refutes the third false claim in verse 10.

3. False Claim #3: Sin is Not Present in My Life

If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. (1:10)

This is the most blatant of the three denials. While conceding in theory that sin does break our fellowship with God and that sin does exist in our disposition, we deny in practice that we have sinned and thus remove ourselves from fellowship with God. The heretics of John’s day maintained that their superior enlightenment rendered them incapable of sinning.

John is as clear here as he is in the other two false claims. To say that we have not sinned is not just telling a deliberate lie as in verse 6 or being deluded as in verse 8. To say this is to actually accuse God of lying. And to reveal that His word is not in us because His word frequently declares that sin is universal, and the word of the gospel, which is a gospel of salvation, clearly assumes the sinfulness of man.

I doubt there are many among us who would have the audacity to claim that they have never sinned, especially among those of us who have lived very long. But having worked with high school students for a number of years I know that sometimes they may have a different attitude. At times they wonder if they are really as bad as the Bible proclaims. Recently, I came across some startling statistics:

1. 65% of all high school students are sexually active. Nearly two out of three students are involved in a sexual relationship.
2. 75% of all students cheat regularly and believe it is okay. Three out of four entering college have already made the value judgment that cheating is not only acceptable, it is the right thing to do to succeed.
3. 30% of all seniors have shoplifted in the last 30 days. One student’s honest revelation was that the fad is to see how much you can take from a store without paying.
4. 45-50% of teenage pregnancies are aborted.
5. 10% of all high school students have experimented with or are living a homosexual lifestyle.

Sin is alive and well, my friends, at any age.

What are we to do in light of such penetrating truth? Do we give up and resign ourselves to the fact that we will always sin? John does not want his readers to think that the frank admission and full forgiveness of our sins allows us to treat sin lightly. It would be possible to misunderstand his statements and think, “If sin is inevitable, why struggle against it?” To counteract this misunderstanding, he begins a new sentence in which the problem of sin in the Christian is dealt with directly.

Instead of adding “if” as in the previous claims, John begins a new sentence in order to enlarge upon the subject of sin in the Christian. Look at the first two verses of chapter 2:

My little children, I am writing these things to you 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)

There is a wonderful balance expressed in this sentence. It is possible to be too lenient or too severe towards sin. Too much leniency encourages sin by stressing God's provision for the sinner. An exaggerated severity, on the other hand, would deny the possibility of a Christian sinning or refuse forgiveness for failure. We can never escape the command of Jesus to sin no more. However, John says if any man sins God has made restoration possible; he has made provision.

This brings us to the second major point of these verses. Alongside of the human problem is a divine solution.

B. The Divine Solution: There is a Savior

This provision which God has made is unfolded in these verses. It is in the one who is described as "an Advocate with the Father," as "Jesus Christ the righteous," and as "the propitiation for our sins."

Jesus is our Advocate. This word literally means "to come alongside" and describes someone coming alongside to assist another. It was particularly used in the law courts to refer to an attorney who acted as the counsel for the defense, pleading the case of the person on trial. Although the verb is frequently used in the New Testament, the noun is only used by John, here and in the Upper Room Discourse where Jesus labels the Holy Spirit as his Advocate. Just as we have an Advocate in heaven, Christ has an Advocate on earth. The Holy Spirit is Christ's Advocate, pleading his case before a hostile world. As our Advocate in heaven, Christ pleads our case against our accuser (Rev 12:10) before the Father who loves and forgives His children.

This forgiveness is assured through the advocacy of "Jesus Christ, the righteous." This is a composite expression which reveals his human nature (Jesus), his Messianic office (Christ), and his righteous character. In the midst of a sobering passage about the darkness of humanity, Jesus Christ is the exception. There is no shame in Him, only glory. There is no dark side, only light. He knew no sin; he had no sin; he did no sin. He had no sin nature for he was born without sin. Knowing no sin, having no sin and doing no sin, He qualified as the Lamb of God who took away the power of sin and the dread of death.

We have pictured here the righteous Advocate standing before the Father on our behalf. I used to think this was a case of "love pleading with justice," but now I see it differently. It is "justice pleading with love" for our release! Because he is this righteous one, he can be our Advocate.

Notice that our Advocate does not plead our innocence. Instead, he acknowledges our guilt and presents his vicarious sacrifice as the grounds of our acquittal. He is the propitiation for our sins. There needed to be a payment for the sin. His righteous character and sacrificial death paid that debt. As the hymn reminds us: "Amazing love! How can it be,/That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!"

I told you last week that John's desire was to simplify the truth. We have the truth of the gospel boiled down for us in these verses. Let me spell it out for you:

- God's Character: Infinitely Holy (God is light)
- Our Condition: Totally Depraved (We are sinners)
- Our Need: a Substitute
- God's Provision: a Savior

Allow me to be personal. Some of you are walking in darkness. You are ignoring sin in your life, and this is sapping the life out of you. You know loneliness and fear because of your sin. God longs for us to have fellowship with him, to be in a relationship of intimacy and love. The unconfessed sin in your life is preventing you from enjoying that fellowship.

Some of you are living in sexual immorality. Some of you are in homosexual or lesbian relationships. Some of you are regularly cheating on tests. Some of you are cheating regularly on your spouses. Some of you may be involved in incest or in child abuse. Whatever your sin, you are imprisoned.

I want to ask you to take some courageous steps. Step out of the prison of your darkness and walk into the light. You need to make two decisions. First, you must confess your sin before God. Second, you need to confess it to another brother or sister who can pray for you. If you cannot confess your sin to someone else, I wonder if you have truly confessed it to God. If it is easy to confess to God, why is it so difficult to confess to someone else?

I want you to know that God has wonderfully provided a divine solution. I know it is not an easy thing to do. It is a scary thing to reveal your nakedness. We are afraid and ashamed. But God's promise is that we need not be afraid of the light. As we step out of the darkness and confess our sin, we will experience the wonderful joy of fellowship and the sweet relief of His cleansing grace.

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1 John 2:3-11

Third Message

Gary Vanderet

December 4, 1988

WALKING IN LOVE

SERIES: LIVING CONFIDENTLY IN THE LIGHT

As a child, I enjoyed the television game show *To Tell the Truth*. The show centered on three guests, each claiming to be a certain individual who had accomplished something special or unusual. One of the guests was the real person, the other two were imposters. The panel of contestants would ask each of these guests certain questions and try to determine which one was telling the truth. At the end of the questioning, the contestants would give their reasons as to why they believed Guest #1, 2 or 3 was the real person. Then Bud Collyer would give his famous line: “Will the real So-and-So please stand up?” After a teasing bob up and down from the other two guests, the real one would stand. Often the audience would gasp in amazement. My brothers and I always voted and were usually wrong. The guests lied so well it was difficult to know which one was the real person. I remember thinking at times, “That’s not the real person. Guest #2 answered the questions much better than he.”

In a very crude sense, 1 John is a version of *To Tell the Truth*. The question that the apostle John asks is, “Will the real believers please stand up?” You see, a group of people had left the church, claiming to know God yet their lives and teaching were quite different from those who remained. They even tried to influence and challenge the other believers to leave the church as well. Since there was much confusion about their doctrine, it was vital that Christians know what lay at the heart of Christianity. Thus, in his later days, John recorded his final thoughts on the nature of the faith so that once and for all we would get it straight.

I mentioned to you in introducing this book that one of its primary purposes is to give those who are already believers a greater assurance as to their salvation so that they might live confidently in the light. John does this through a series of tests that we can use to determine whether or not we have been born again. In fact, there are three tests woven throughout the book, two of which we will see in chapter 2, verses 3-11. First, there is a moral test, the test of obedience. Then there is a social test, the test of love. Finally, there is a doctrinal test, the test of truth. The rest of the epistle is essentially an elaboration and application of these tests. We will become quite familiar with them before we have completed our study of this book.

So far, John has been dealing with the historical basis for our faith, the nature of what we believe as Christians. Now, he will speak to the issue of how we can truly tell whether or not someone knows God. The structure of the passage is clear. In the preceding section, John recorded three false claims of the heretics, each introduced by the phrase, “If we say that we have.” Now he introduces two positive assurances the true Christian can have with the phrase “by this we know that” in verses 3 and 5. This is a characteristic phrase of the epistle.

John’s emphasis on knowledge is purposeful. He does not say, “By this we know that we are Christians,” or “By this we know that we are born again.” Rather he says, “By this, we know that we have come to know Him.” The reason for his emphasis on knowledge is

the nature of the false teaching John is attacking. It was an early form of a heresy which later became known as gnosticism—a complex combination of pagan, Jewish, and semi-Christian beliefs. Its two primary emphases were the supremacy of knowledge and the impurity of matter. They called themselves “the knowing ones,” which is essentially what “gnosticism” means. The Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*. To them, salvation came from an initiation into the mystical and allegedly superior knowledge that only a few possessed.

Since the gnostics made so much of this idea of knowledge, John uses it. He says in essence, “So you want to talk about knowledge... fine. What are the characteristics of one who really knows God?” The gnostics, in particular, laid claim to an intimate, mystical knowledge of God. They thought they had been enlightened with the true *gnosis*. John does not deny the possibility of knowing God, but he insists that any such experience is validated by certain consequences. In this passage, John gives two of the necessary consequences.

Let us look at the first test given in verses 3-6.

I. Becoming a Christian Produces a Desire to Obey—There is a Submissive Will

And 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. (1 John 2:3-6 NASB)

How can we be sure we have come to know Jesus Christ? John is speaking about the present reality of an experience that occurred in the past—the conversion experience of the believer. Notice the tense of the verbs: “By this we know that we *have come* to know Him, if we *are now keeping* His commandments.” Only by my present willingness to keep his commandments do I know that I have a valid relationship with him. Only if we obey him can we claim to have come to know him.

To know him is not just having accurate information about him. Rather it is to be intimately acquainted with him. The word “keep” expresses the idea of watchful, observant obedience. It is not the person who claims to be a Christian and to know God who is presumptuous, but he whose claim is contradicted by his life. Verse 4 says he is a liar.

Now we all have times in our lives when we have disobeyed. All of us have areas in which we struggle. John is not speaking about perfection. Remember he already warned that if we say we have no sin we are lying. But the key question is, “Are you willing to obey him?” When God makes his will clear, is your heart committed to following him? When someone confronts you with truth, what is your posture? You may have problems in your Christian life and ar-

eas in which you are particularly weak and vulnerable, but you know to whom you belong and who has the ultimate authority in your life. In your heart, what he says goes; he is the final decision-maker.

We need understand what John is not saying. He is not saying that we can know God by attempting to keep his commandments. That is impossible! We cannot reverse the order. We come to know God through faith alone, receiving his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. When we do this, he comes quietly and invisibly into our lives and begins his work in our hearts. One primary sign of his work is a change in our attitudes—a softening of our wills and a desire to obey.

Let me give you an example. I mentioned a few weeks ago that I had the privilege of being involved in a young man's conversion. He asked Christ into his life after reading about our Lord in John's gospel. I am now in the midst of doing premarital counseling with him and his fiancée. I always give couples a personality test which helps to reveal the potential adjustments they will have to make in living together. His personality test scores revealed him to be an extremely dominant, hostile person. When I asked him about this, he and his fiancée confirmed the test results and gave me examples of his behavior. However he also admitted being a bit perplexed as he answered the questions because so much had changed in his life. In fact, the test score was a bit surprising to me because I only saw a submissive will. I did not see that arrogant hostility at all. He has already experienced what John is talking about here. He has already seen God producing a submissive will and a desire to obey. There will still be struggles in his life. When he relies on the flesh, he will still act as ugly as he did before, but the issue of Lordship is settled.

There are two observations we can make about obedience from these verses.

A. Obedience Validates Our Love

John says, "Whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has been truly perfected." Obedience in the believer perfects or completes his love. The phrase "the love of God" could be taken three ways, referring to God's love for us, to love like God's love, or to our love for God. In this context, I believe John is referring our love for God. Our love is "perfected"—it is made complete. I am sure John recalls Jesus' teaching in the upper room when he said to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." The proof of our love is loyalty. John is saying that true love for God is not expressed in sentimental language or a mystical experience but in a submissive will, in obedience.

B. Obedience Manifests Our Relationship

John states the same principle again in a slightly different form in the latter part of verses 5-6: "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."

Being "in Him" and "abiding in Him" are equivalent to the phrases "know Him" in verses 3-4 and "love Him" in verse 5. Being a Christian consists of a personal relationship to God in Christ—knowing him, loving him, and abiding in him, as a branch abides in a vine (John 15). Our obedience reveals our relationship.

Notice that our obedience involves obeying the example of Christ as well as his commandments—"we are to walk in the same manner as He walked." We are to live not merely by rules but by an example. We are to follow Jesus, to be his disciples.

That is the first test to determine whether we have come to know God. Becoming a Christian produces a desire to obey—there is a

submissive will. Spurgeon once said, "An unchanged life is the sign of an uncleansed heart." If there has been no basic change in one's life, there is nothing that indicates to him, or to anybody else, that he has been delivered from the bondage of Satan and the power of evil into the kingdom of God.

There is a second test revealed in verses 7-11.

II. Becoming a Christian Produces an Ability to Love— There is a Caring Heart

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)

John now applies a second test to professing Christians, which is moral not social. Since he is about to write about "brotherly love," he appropriately addresses his readers as his "beloved." In urging them to love one another, he assures them of his love for them.

John has been writing about the Christian's obligation to keep God's commandments; he now singles out one of them which he says is in one sense "old" and in another sense "new." He does not explicitly reveal the nature of this commandment, but the essence of verses 9-11 is love, and John would have remembered what Jesus said in John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Thus, we know that the commandment he is speaking about concerns brotherly love.

Let us make two observations about this test.

A. To Be in Christ Is to Know Genuine Love

Was this commandment old or new? It is both.

It was old in that his readers had learned it before. They had known it from the outset of their upbringing. So basic was it to the teaching they had received that John could even equate it with "the word that you have heard." This commandment was first given in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, which instructed man to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" and secondly to "love your neighbor as yourself."

The commandment was old in that it existed before Christ's coming. But it was also new in so many ways! Jesus made an old commandment new. How?

The commandment was new in the extent to which it reached. The Jews of Jesus' day had watered down the Mosaic teaching of loving one's neighbor so that they could love or hate anyone they wanted. Jesus taught in the parable of the good Samaritan that our neighbor whom we must love is anyone who needs our compassion and help, irrespective of race or rank. This was a radically new commandment to a world sharply divided by prejudice—between masters and slaves and between Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles regarded the Jews as

barbarians. The Jews had the reputation of being the haters of the world. There also existed the chasm between man and woman. The world of that day seemed hopelessly divided, yet Jesus changed it all. Alexander Maclaren describes the change:

Barbarian, Scythian, bond and free, male and female, Jew and Greek, learned and ignorant, clasped hands and sat down at one table, and felt themselves all one in Christ Jesus. They were ready to break all the other bonds, and to yield to the uniting forces that streamed out from His Cross. There never had been anything like it. No wonder that the world began to babble about sorcery and conspiracies and complicity in unnameable vices. It was only that the disciples were obeying the new commandment, and a new thing had come into the world—a community held together by love and not by geographical accidents or linguistic affinities, or the iron fetters of the conqueror... The new commandment made a new thing, and the world wondered.

The commandment was new in the lengths to which it would go. Jesus said to love one another “as I have loved you.” In these words, we can see the radical nature of the commandment. While it is difficult to love our neighbor as ourselves, it is far more demanding to love others as Christ loves them. Our love often depends upon the lovableness of the object. The kind of love we normally express is described in a sick little poem I came across some years ago entitled “My Girl:”

Steve’s girl is rich and haughty;
My girl is poor as clay.
Steve’s girl is young and pretty;
My girl looks like a bale of hay.
Steve’s girl is smart and clever;
My girl is dumb, but good.
But would I trade my girl for Steve’s?
You bet your life I would!

The nature of Christ’s love is different. His is unconditional and sacrificial. And here we must look to the cross. For it is at the cross where we see the depth of God’s love, and it is not seen to the that degree anywhere else: “Greater love has no man than this, than one lay down his love for his friends.”

The commandment was new to the degree to which it was realized. John says the truth is seen “in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.” In this verse “true” means “genuine, real.” Jesus is the true or real light of which physical light is just a reflection. Jesus is the substance of which everything else before him was shadow. And Jesus’ coming has inaugurated a new age.

All Jews were familiar with the division of history into “this present age,” and “the age to come” (Matt 12:32). The New Testament teaches that the age to come arrived with Jesus who inaugurated it. Thus, the two ages overlap. As Christians, we have been delivered out of this present evil age (Gal 1:4) and have already begun to taste the powers of the age to come (Heb 6:5; 1 Cor 10:11).

Jesus is the true light just as he is the true bread and the true vine. Therefore, true love, just like true righteousness, is seen not only in him but in those who are made alive in him as well. When Jesus said to love one another “as I have loved you,” he was speaking not only of the content of his love but also the manner.

In John’s gospel, we find the secret of how Christ loved: “Just as the Father Has loved me; I also loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” Jesus was

able to love his disciples because he was dependent on the Father, and the Father filled his life with love. Jesus said the same is true for us now. As we stay close to Christ and live dependently on him, he will fill our lives with love; and we will love others not because they are lovable but because they get in our way, they cross our path. This is John’s point.

So this new commandment remains new because it belongs to the new age which has been ushered in by the shining of the true light in which we are all partaking. In verses 9-11, John reinforces this truth by showing that Jesus Christ, the true light, is the light of love. Therefore, to walk in the light is to walk in love. Light and love belong together, just as darkness and hatred do.

As in the first test, John gives an example. The falsity of one’s claim to be in the light is betrayed here not by disobedience, but by hatred. The genuineness of a man’s faith is seen both in his right relationship with God and with man. The second principle is found in these verses.

B. A Loving Heart Produces a Clear Eye

These verses teach us that our love and hatred not only reveal whether we are in the light or in the darkness, but that they actually contribute towards the light or darkness in which we are walking. And as a result there is no cause for stumbling in him. The one who walks in the light has more light day by day. The one who walks in the darkness is increasingly darkened.

If we love people, we see clearly how to avoid sinning against them. Hatred distorts our perspective. We do not first misjudge people and then hate them as a result; our view of them is already distorted by our darkened perspective. Only the loving heart sees straight, thinks clearly and makes us balanced in our outlook, judgments and conduct.

This was revealed to me recently while reading the true story of Teddy Stallard (*Who Changed The Price Tags?*, by Tony Campolo),¹ who by his own admission was an unattractive, unmotivated little boy. He was difficult to like. Especially for a school teacher who all day long faced his dead-pan, expressionless, unfocused stare. Although his fifth grade teacher said she loved all her students, Miss Thompson had to admit that deep down she wasn’t being honest. She didn’t like him, and she even received a certain perverse pleasure in marking his papers with red ink and writing the F’s with a flair. Her view of him was already distorted by her perspective, but she should have known better. As his teacher, she had his records, and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit:

First Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but he has a poor home situation.

Second Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

Third Grade: Teddy is a good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

Fourth Grade: Teddy is very slow but well behaved. His father shows no interest.

At Christmas, her class all brought her presents in pretty wrappings, and gathered round to watch her open them. She was surprised when she received a gift from Teddy. It was crudely wrapped in brown paper loosely held together with tape. When she opened it, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume. The children began to giggle, but she had

enough sense to put on the bracelet and apply some of the perfume on her wrist. She asked the class, "Doesn't it smell lovely?"

When school was over and the children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother. And her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you liked my presents." When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her.

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Mrs Thompson had become a new person. She was no longer just a teacher; she had become an agent of God. (Notice her clear eye and changed perspective!) She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. By the end of that school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement and had caught up with most of the students.

She did not hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day she received a note that said:

Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Four years later, she received another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Finally, she received another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard.

Miss Thompson went to that wedding. She deserved to sit where his mother would have sat; she had earned that right. She had done something for Teddy that he could never forget.

I must admit that this truth is not only difficult for you to hear, it has had a profound impact on my own life as well. It wasn't that many years ago, I had to admit that, although my family knew intellectually that I loved them, in many ways they did not feel my love. God had to do some major surgery in my life to teach me what was really important.

Parents, do you know what your children need? More than any books on parenting, more than any techniques, they need to see a mother and father with a submissive will and a loving heart. Those two things will foster the genuine faith of your children more than anything else you can do.

This is also what your neighbors long to see. In fact, this is what the world is waiting to see. Jesus told us: "By this will all men know that you are my disciples when you have love for one another." This love is ours in the person of Jesus Christ who freely gave of himself for us. If you were the only person on earth, he would have died for you. We are all Teddy Stallards.

At Christmas, we are often at a loss as to what to give to people. Let me close offering a few suggestions: This year give some of yourself away. Give an hour of your time to someone who needs you. Give a note of encouragement to someone who is down. Give a hug of affirmation to someone in your family. Give a meal you prepared to someone who is sick. Give a word of compassion to someone who suffered a loss. Give an act of kindness to someone who is often overlooked. And maybe our neighbors won't be so amazed when the real believers do stand up.

1. Though widely circulated as factual, the story of Teddy Stallard is actually a work of fiction: "Three Letters from Teddy" by Elizabeth Ballaney, published in *Home Life* magazine in 1976.

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Catalog No. 716

1 John 2:12-17

Fourth Message

Gary Vanderet

December 11, 1988

GROWING IN GRACE AND STRENGTH

SERIES: LIVING CONFIDENTLY IN THE LIGHT

Have you ever been misunderstood? Perhaps something you said did not come out exactly the way you wanted, or maybe someone took something you said and twisted it to mean something you never intended. Faulty communication can occasionally be humorous, especially when we catch it in print. Perhaps you have even caught a few typographical errors in our church bulletins. Here are a few mistakes that have come across my desk in church bulletins:

- “This afternoon there will be a meeting in the north and south ends of the church. Children will be baptized at both ends.”
- “This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Franklin to come forward before the offering and lay an egg on the altar.”
- “On Wednesday, the Ladies Literary Society will meet. Mrs. Willard will sing ‘Put Me in My Little Bed,’ accompanied by the Reverend.”

Sometimes our mistakes are corrected by greater mistakes. Listen to this comedy of errors that actually appeared in a newspaper several years ago. On the first day, the advertisement read:

FOR SALE—R. D. Jones has one sewing machine for sale. Phone 958-3030 after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him cheap.

On the next day the ad was “corrected” by the newspaper to read:

NOTICE—We regret having erred in R. D. Jones’ ad yesterday. It should have read: One sewing machine for sale. Cheap. Phone 958-3030 and ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him after 7 p.m.

The correction was “corrected” the day after:

R. D. Jones has informed us that he received several anonymous telephone phone calls because of the error we made in the classified ad yesterday. His ad stands corrected as follows:

FOR SALE—R. D. Jones has one sewing machine for sale. Cheap. Phone 958-3030 after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Kelly who loves with him.

Finally, Mr. Jones corrected the ad himself with a second ad:

NOTICE—I, R. D. Jones, have no sewing machine for sale. I SMASHED IT. Don’t call 958-3030 as the telephone has been taken out. I have not been carrying on with Mrs. Kelly. Until yesterday she was my housekeeper, but SHE QUIT.

Poor guy! He not only lost his sale, he lost his help.

Fortunately for the apostle John, there is no error in his communication. There are no typos in his epistle. However, he is deeply concerned about faulty communication. John has been discussing the tests by which the presence of the life of God within an individual can be discerned, and conversely he has spoken of those in whom it is not present. At times, his words have been harsh. He has said that those who profess to know God but who fail to obey his laws are liars. He has added that those who say they love God but

fail to love their brothers are walking in the dark, and do not know where they are going.

What would be the reaction of John’s readers to these words? Maybe they reacted as some of you have in the past weeks. We can imagine that some of them took these words personally, admitting that at times they did not obey God, that they did not love one another. Surely some would have wondered if they were truly born again. But this is not how John wants them to think. In fact, he is writing his letter not to increase their doubt but to strengthen their assurance.

Thus, he interrupts his presentation of the tests to direct a personal word to his readers. First, he assures them, in spite of what he has said, that he has no doubt of their having come to a knowledge of God. In fact, it is because they know God, rather than not knowing him, that he is writing to them. It is the false teachers whom he regards as spurious, not the loyal members of the church. After that word of assurance, he offers a word of warning which reveals the way in which his remarks *are* to be taken by Christians.

The word of assurance is given in verses 12-14, the warning in verses 15-17. Let us examine first John’s word of assurance.

I. A Word of Assurance to the Church (2:12-14)

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name 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. (1 John 2:12-14 NASB)

In six parallel statements, John addresses three groups of Christians using the terminology of a family—children, young men, and fathers. However, he is not referring to actual groups of people but to different stages of spiritual life. They have no relation to physical age or sex, but to spiritual development in a Christian’s life—the innocence of childhood, the strength of youth, and the mature knowledge of age. The “little children” are the newborn in Christ. The “young men” are more developed Christians, strong and victorious in spiritual warfare, and the “fathers” possess the depth and stability of Christian experience.

It is significant that in each of these six statements the verb is in the perfect tense which indicates the present consequence of a past event. John is emphasizing the assured standing which every Christian has, regardless of his stage of spiritual development. In fact, I believe John’s point in these verses is this:

As Christians, We Are Assured of God's Love at Every Stage of Growth

As Children, We Experience His Forgiveness—John says, “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name sake,” and secondly, “I have written to you, children, because you know the Father.” These are the earliest conscious experiences of the newborn Christian. He rejoices in the forgiveness of his sins through Christ and in his consequent fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit within him makes him aware of his sonship and causes him to cry, “Abba! Father!”

Although this is true of all Christians at all stages of development, it is the first fact that we are aware of as believers. There is the lifting of the load of guilt, the solving of the problem of destiny, the awareness of the wonderful fact of the forgiveness of sins. John Bunyan describes this well in *Pilgrim's Progress* when Christian struggles through the Slough of Despond. He is terribly discouraged having the great burden of guilt on his back. Then he sees a cross far in the distance. As he approaches it, he feels the burden roll off his back and experiences release and freedom.

I vividly remember that experience in my own life. I grew up in a nominally religious home. I always believed in a God, but it never had much effect in my life. I had a fear of God but no knowledge of his love and provision. It was not until I was in college that a friend invited me to church and gave me a New Testament to read. As I read it, I was overwhelmed by the person of Jesus Christ and his love for me. How well I remember the evening in January 1970 at a Campus Crusade meeting on the campus of Whittier College when I asked Jesus Christ to come into my life! As I did so, I remember the joy I experienced in knowing that my sins were forgiven. There was such freedom inside my heart. Having never had a father growing up, it was especially meaningful to me that God was no longer an stern, austere judge, but a loving heavenly Father.

There is such a wonderful innocence about infancy! It does not matter that infants demand so much attention and are so self-centered—everyone is thrilled with new life. Having a newborn around our house, I know the joy they bring to a family. Although little Timothy contributes nothing to the running of our household at this point, there is joy in knowing he is a part of our family. And the fact that he knows his daddy is good enough for me! This is John's point: children know their Father.

Now John moves on to the other end of the growth process, to the fully mature Christians—the fathers.

As Fathers, We Experience His Intimacy—Fathers are the spiritual adults in the congregation. Their first flush of ecstasy in receiving forgiveness of sins and fellowship with the Father is long past. Even the battles of the young men, to which John will refer next, are past. The fathers have passed into a deep communion with God. Although children also know the Father, those who have spent many years with the Lord know him as He who is “from the beginning,” referring to the eternal God who does not change with advancing years, as men do, but who is forever the same.

The fathers have spent many years in fellowship with God, and they have seen his faithfulness through all the seasons of life. There is a stability that this long fellowship produces, and their deep joy is found in knowing and loving this God whom they have served. They are already consciously living in eternity.

I value the spiritual fathers in our congregation, and the stability these men and women have produced in our fellowship. I would like to publicly thank you for the faithful model you are of our loving heavenly Father.

The third group is the young men.

As Young Men, We Experience His Power—In between the children and fathers, this group is busily involved in the battle of Christian living. As most of us know, the Christian life is not just enjoying the forgiveness and fellowship of God. It also involves fighting the enemy. The forgiveness of past sins must be followed by deliverance from sin's present power; justification must be followed by sanctification. The distinctive mark of this group, John says, is that they have overcome the devil. They are strong, and in Christ they are able to meet all of Satan's attacks. Their conflict has become a conquest.

Notice that the secret of the young men's strength is given in the phrase “the word of God abides in you.” They have grasped the truth. They both understand and have submitted their lives to the Scriptures. Maybe John had in mind Psalm 119:9, 11:

**How can a young man keep his way pure,
By keeping it according to Thy word...
Thy word have I treasured in my heart,
That I might not sin against Thee.**

It was John who wrote in the twelfth chapter of Revelation, “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” These victors have learned to handle “the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.”

This is an important word for us who are in the battle. Some of you need to leave the comfortable stage of childhood where you are enjoying the forgiveness and knowledge of God because that is not all there is to the Christian life. God has made provision for you to grow strong. Jesus told us, “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God.” This book, the Bible, will help you grow. You need to understand it, submit to it, discover your spiritual gifts, and take your place in the battle.

At whatever stage we find ourselves, whether child, young man or father, we can be assured of our standing before God and of his unconditional love. What a wonderful comfort that is! We never need to fear growing up. God's provisions are reliable, and he will take us through every stage, always giving us what we need to grow.

I love the story, recorded in Charles Swindoll's book *Living on the Ragged Edge*, which Charles Allen tells of John Todd, born in 1800 in Vermont. By the time John was six, both of his parents had died. When the children were parceled out to relatives, a kind-hearted aunt agreed to take John. He lived with her for fifteen years until he left to study for the ministry. Many years later, he received word that she was dying. When she wrote and asked him what death would be like, this was John's reply:

It is now thirty-five years since I, a little boy of six, was left quite alone in the world. You sent me word you would give me a home and be a kind mother to me. I have never forgotten the day when I made the long journey of ten miles to your house in North Killingsworth. I can still recall my disappointment when, instead of coming for me yourself, you sent your colored man, Caesar, to fetch me. I well remember my tears and my anxiety as, perched high on your horse and clinging tight to Caesar, I rode off to my new home. Night fell before we finished the journey and as it grew dark, I became lonely and afraid.

“Do you think she’ll go to bed before I get there?” I asked Caesar anxiously. “Oh no,” he said reassuringly. “She’ll sure stay up for you. When we get out of these here woods you’ll see her candle shining in the window.” Presently we did ride out in the clearing and there, sure enough, was your candle. I remember you were waiting at the door, that you put your arms close about me and that you lifted me—a tired and bewildered little boy—down from the horse. You had a big fire burning on the hearth, a hot supper waiting for me on the stove. After supper, you took me to my new room, you heard me say my prayers and then you sat beside me until I fell asleep.

You probably realize why I am recalling all this to your memory. Some day soon, God will send for you, to take you to a new home. Don’t fear the summons—the strange journey—or the dark messenger of death. God can be trusted to do as much for you as you were kind enough to do for me so many years ago. At the end of the road you will find love and a welcome waiting, and you will be safe in God’s care. I shall watch you and pray for you until you are out of sight, and then wait for the day when I shall make the journey myself and find you waiting at the end of the road to greet me.

In other words, John Todd was saying, “Don’t worry, Auntie, you are expected. I know for sure because I saw God standing in your doorway a long time ago.” That is also John’s word of assurance to his readers: “I have seen God in your lives. Don’t fear the path, no matter what stage you are in; God can be trusted.”

Although we have entered into a great inheritance in the forgiveness of sins, fellowship with God, and victory over the evil one, we know that our temptations have not come to end. John now shifts from a word of affirmation to a word of warning in verses 15-17.

II. A Word of Warning Concerning the World (2:15-17)

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

John now turns from a description of the church to a description of the world and instruction about the church’s attitude toward it. John’s principle is this:

As Christians, We Must Be Careful that the Father’s Love Remains Foremost in Our Affections

John’s command to us is “Do not love the world.” To what is he referring? The word *kosmos* is used in different ways in the New Testament. In John 1:10, “world” refers to the universe, which is the word’s basic meaning. In the early history of the Greek language, *kosmos* meant “ornament.” This meaning is preserved in our word “cosmetic.” Later, the “universe” became the “ornament” of God. Later on, the word came to denote the world of men as in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...”

Later, the word developed an ethical dimension which is the most common use of the word in John’s writings and is the use referred to in this passage. This pictures the world of men in rebellion against God and therefore characterized by all that is in opposition to God. This is what we might call “the world system.” It involves the world’s values and priorities, its pleasures and pastimes.

Viewed as people, the world must be loved. Viewed as an evil system organized under the dominion of Satan, it is not to be loved. John says if there was anything in the world which was of the Father,

then we might love it. But since “all that is in the world...is from the world,” we are not to love any of it. To make his point, John selects three elements which characterize the world.

First, he names “the lust of the flesh.” The flesh here refers not to our bodies, per se, but to our fallen and sinful nature. The NIV translates this “the cravings of sinful man.” Thus, the flesh refers to the sinful tendencies which are present in the body. God has given us certain desires which are good: hunger, thirst, rest and sex. But when the sinful nature controls these desires, it always wants more or seeks to satisfy them in ways that are harmful. Barclay notes, “It is to live a life which is dominated by the senses. It is to be gluttonous in food, effeminate in luxury, slavish in pleasure, lax in morals, selfish in the use of possessions, extravagant in the gratification of worldly, earthly, and material desires.”

Second, John names the “lust of the eyes.” This indicates the temptations which assault us not from within but from without. Our eyes can have an appetite as well. Have you ever said, “Feast your eyes on this”? The lust of the eyes is the tendency to be captivated by the outward show of things without inquiring into their real value. As one man noted, “It will include the love of beauty without the love of goodness.” Eve’s view of the forbidden tree as a “delight to the eyes” reflects this lust. David experienced the same lust when he looked over his balcony and saw Bathsheba bathing.

Finally, John refers to the “boastful pride of life.” This refers to an arrogance or vainglory about one’s external circumstances, whether wealth, rank or dress. “Pretentious ostentation” would be a good summary for this phrase. This pride is the attitude of arrogance derived from acquiring things. We see this every day in our valley and in our own lives.

To love the world is to be preoccupied with physical and sensual pleasures. To love the world is to be preoccupied with the temporal instead of the eternal. To love the world is to be preoccupied with ourselves and our own needs instead of the needs of others.

We can misinterpret these verses as some have, to think that our sexuality is evil or that having and enjoying nice things is wrong. This would certainly miss the point of this passage. We are told elsewhere in Scripture that “God has given us all things richly to enjoy.” The warning here is concerning our affections which can be so easily deceived.

In exhorting his readers not to love the world, John also reveals two critical and searching reasons why this is the only sane choice.

A. The Love of the World and the Love of the Father are Mutually Exclusive

John says, “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” He is not saying that we should not love both, but that it is impossible. You can not do both—It is one or the other. Jesus put it this way: “No man can serve two masters.” We are only deceiving ourselves if we think we can. We were made to be mastered by someone, and that someone is either the world, which is the channel and activity of the evil one, or God. James tells us that “friendship with the world is enmity against God.” Paul tells us in 2 Timothy that one of the marks of the last days is that men will be “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”

These two loves are mutually exclusive and absolutely antagonistic ideas. It is a deceitful message that can creep into our mind, and before we know it, we think we can have the best of both worlds. We cannot. Both forces promise to satisfy us and give us rich, full lives.

One is telling a lie, the other the truth. One thing is certain—we must make a choice. Martha Snell Nicholson's words ring true:

One by one God took them from me,
All the things I value most,
Till I was empty-handed,
Every glittering toy was lost.

And I walked earth's highway grieving
In my rags and poverty
Till I heard His inviting
"Lift those empty hands to Me."

So I turned my hand toward heaven,
And He filled them with a store
Of His own transcendent riches
Till I could contain no more.

At last I comprehended
With my stupid mind and dull
That God could not pour out His riches
Into hands already full.

The love of the world and the love of the Father are mutually exclusive. There is a second reason given to us in verse 17.

B. The World is Transitory and Headed for Destruction

John says, "And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever." Do you know what? The one who dies with the most toys does not win! Do not live for this world. Do not love its glory, seek its fame, or consider important the things it can give. Do not cling to these so desperately, letting your emotions get wrapped up in them. Hold them loosely, or as Corrie Ten Boom reminds us, God will have to pry your fingers loose.

If we want to get the most out of life, we must learn to give priority to the things that are important. Pepsi does not give us life. Buicks are not something to believe in. Lowenbrau does not bring us good friends. Jim Elliot, the missionary who died at the hands of the Aucas Indians, penned words that echo the point John is making, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

As we plan to celebrate Christmas with our families, I urge us to enter this season with our priorities clear and our affections fixed on the things that matter. We will be bombarded by a marketing strategy that appeals to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life.

I was recently reminded about focusing on things that are lasting when I read about playwright Moss Hart's childhood experience that occurred one Christmas. Let me close with his words found in *Creative Brooding* by Robert Raines:

We hurried on, our heads bent against the wind, to the cluster of lights ahead that was 149th Street and Winchester Avenue, and those lights seemed to me to be the brightest lights I had ever seen. Tugging at my father's coat, I started down the line of pushcarts...I would merely pause before a pushcart to say, with as much control as I could muster, "Look at that chemistry set!" or, "There's a stamp album!" or, "Look at the printing press!"

Each time my father would pause and ask the pushcart man the price. Then without a word we would move on the next pushcart. Once or twice he would pick up a toy of some kind and look at it and then at me, as if to suggest this might be something I might like, but I was ten years old and a good deal beyond just a toy; my heart was set on a chemistry set or a printing press. There they were on every pushcart we stopped at, but the price was always the same and soon I looked up and saw we were nearing the end of the line. Only two or more pushcarts remained. My father looked up too, and I heard him jingle some coins in his pocket. In a flash I knew it all. He'd gotten together about seventy-five cents to buy me a Christmas present, and he hadn't dare say so in case there was nothing to be had for so small a sum.

As I looked up at him I saw a look of despair and disappointment in his eyes that brought me closer to him than I have ever been in my life. I wanted to throw my arms around and say, "It doesn't matter...I understand...This is better than a chemistry set or a printing press... I love you." But instead we stood shivering beside each other for a moment—then turned away from the last two pushcarts and started silently back home...I didn't even take his hand on the way home nor did he take mine. We were not on that basis. Nor did I ever tell him I close I felt to him that night—that for a little while the concrete wall between father and son had crumbled away and I knew that we were two lonely people struggling to reach each other.

It seems amazing to us that a father and son could stand side by side like statues on that cold, windy day, shivering and silent. But that look of despair need not be in our eyes because we can be assured of the love of the Father and know his love at every stage of life. But we also need to be warned because the love of the world is a deceiving threat to the love of the Father. Let us be sure that we have our affections in order as we go into the Christmas season, assured of our Heavenly Father's love, and always careful to keep that love foremost in our hearts.

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Catalog No. 725

1 John 5:13-21

Thirteenth Message

Gary Vanderet

June 25, 1989

WALKING IN CONFIDENCE

SERIES: LIVING CONFIDENTLY IN THE LIGHT

As we come to the end of our study in 1 John I am reminded of a scene in C. S. Lewis' book, *Prince Caspian*, the second in his "Chronicles of Narnia" books. Lucy finally sees the lion, Aslan, again. Aslan, who symbolizes Christ, greets Lucy with these warm words,

"Welcome, child."

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."

It is my prayer that as we conclude our studies in this epistle your view of God has become larger, that you are sensing to a greater degree the assurance of his love and the power of his strength in your daily life.

Unfortunately that isn't always true in all of Christendom. As I read these words I am also reminded of a leading evangelical voice today whose words are sadly true:

We do not have a strong church today nor do we have many strong Christians. We can trace the cause to an acute lack of sound spiritual knowledge. Why is the church weak? Why are individual Christians? It's because they have allowed their minds to become conformed to the "spirit of this age," with its mechanistic, godless thinking. They have forgotten what God is like and what He promises to do for those who trust Him.

Ask an average Christian to talk about God. After getting past the expected answers you will find that his god is a little god of vacillating sentiments. He is a God who would like to save the world but who cannot. He would like to restrain evil, but somehow he finds it beyond his power. So he has withdrawn into semi-retirement, being willing to give good advice in a grandfatherly sort of way, but for the most part he has left his children to fend for themselves in a dangerous environment.

Such a god is not the God of the Bible...the God of the Bible is not weak; He is strong. He is all-mighty. Nothing happens without his permission or apart from His purposes—even evil. Nothing disturbs or puzzles Him. His purposes are always accomplished. Therefore those who know Him rightly act with boldness, assured that God is with them to accomplish His own desirable purposes in their lives.

It is that kind of confidence that we have seen throughout these five chapters in 1 John, and it is this note of positive assurance that rings throughout these last verses. The phrase, "we know," is repeated again and again—six times to be exact. In verse 13 we find not only the purpose of this letter but the climactic assertion to which all of the preceding chapters have been moving: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life."

"These things" refers to the whole letter, not just the preceding verses. In his gospel, John tells us his purpose was "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you

may have life in His name." Now he has written "in order that you may know you have eternal life." It is the joy of assurance.

It is because eternal life is knowing God that we can have this absolute assurance.

Eternal life is a personal, experiential knowledge of God, leading to a lifetime of fellowship with him. It cannot be counterfeited. It cannot be found anywhere else apart from the person of Jesus Christ.

John Stott summarizes the purpose of both John's gospel and epistle in four stages: "that his readers may hear, and hearing may believe, and believing may live, and living may know. Hearing, believing, living, knowing."

The assurance of eternal life is not presumption. Presumptuousness is doubting God's word, not in trusting it. John concludes his letter summarizing what we do know.

Having stated his grand purpose of our assurance, the apostle concludes his letter sharing four certainties, four God-given affirmations which can count on. They summarize the truths that we have learned throughout the book.

We find the first assurance set out in verses 14-17 of the final chapter.

I. We Have a New Assurance in Prayer

And this is the confidence which we have before Him, 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 which we have asked from Him. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death. (1 John 5:14-17 NASB)

The first characteristic of our knowing God, that relationship which is eternal life, is confidence in our approach to the Father. This will naturally be expressed in prayer, where the believer's prayer is marked by this boldness or freedom of speech. Our conversation with God is to be uninhibited, open, relaxed, and yet tempered with reverence and submission. Our prayer will reflect the fact that we are children of a loving heavenly Father, not a cold, distant being.

The writer to the Hebrews expresses this same thought in chapter 4 when he says: "for we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:15-16).

John has already taught us in chapter 3 that we can pray confidently because God in his sovereignty knows us and forgives us.

But there is a limitation to our prayers in verse 14: They are to be “according to His will.” With that condition, we may ask anything. The only reluctance or unwillingness in God is the reluctance to give a dearly loved child something that he in his wisdom knows would not be in the child’s best interest.

Prayer is not an attempt to get God to see things our way and to get from him what we think we need or want. Prayer is submitting our will to his. As Henri Nouwen expressed it:

Prayer is a radical conversion of all our mental processes because in prayer we move away from ourselves, our worries, preoccupation, and self-gratification—and direct all that we recognize as ours to God in the simple trust that through His love all will be made new.

Prayer is for us! It is the means God uses to develop Christ’s Lordship in our lives. That is why it so important for us to pray. The less we pray the more self-willed we become. The essence of assured prayer is the model of the Lord Jesus, “Not my will but thine be done.” One man has paraphrased that part of the Lord’s prayer in this way, “Your will be done in me, your bit of earth, as it is in Christ, who is my heaven!”

That ought to be a great motivation for us to find out God’s will, to build on the commands and promises in his word in our prayers; to talk over every situation with him, and submit all of our thinking, planning, and decision making to him.

A further confidence is given in verse 15, in that we know with God, to hear is to answer. That is the implication of the present tense, “we have the requests which we asked.” There is no period of delay with God. Though from our perspective the answer may not be seen for some time, our requests are granted at once, says John.

There is an excellent illustration of this in the book of Daniel. At the beginning of chapter 10, Daniel receives a revelation from God concerning a great war. Daniel then begins a period of fasting and mourning to give himself to prayer. Three weeks later, an angel appears to him in a vision and says, “Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom [Satan] resisted me twenty-one days” (Dan 10:12-13).

The answer to Daniel’s prayer was immediate, but the experience of it was not. The reason given was the cosmic spiritual warfare that was being waged, in which Daniel was involved through his praying. When we take up the weapon of prayer we are engaging in a battle, as the apostle Paul declares, “not with flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). That is one reason why prayer may appear to be delayed. But is also a great encouragement to continue to pray, knowing that our prayers can play a part in the spiritual battle. Because there is an invisible battle taking place we are encouraged to pray for one another, especially when we see our brother or sister in spiritual need, which is the exhortation in verses 16-17.

Now we must address these verses, which have been debated throughout the centuries, and which are without doubt the most difficult verses to interpret in this book. There are several issues that are related, but the central one is what John means by “a sin that does not lead to death,” and “a sin that leads to death.” In the former case, Christians are urged to pray for a brother whom they see sinning; in the latter, they are not. What is the distinction between the two?

We do not have time to debate the merits of various interpretations this morning, but I will cover in brief form how various people have interpreted these verses. One view is to see this as some specific sin which is so terrible that it is unforgivable. This is the interpretation from which the Roman Catholic Church derives its two categories of sin: venial sins (which are can be pardoned), and mortal sins (sins that lead to death). There is no warrant in this text or in any other to support such an interpretation.

Others have identified this with the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, linking this with the words of Jesus when he warned that such blasphemy can never be forgiven (Matt 12:31-32). Who knows how many sensitive Christians have suffered deeply, imagining that some sin of theirs is the unforgivable sin? Let me say if that is your concern this morning, the very fact that you feel dread is a sure indication that you are not guilty of this sin.

Others have suggested that the only way that sin could lead to death is by its consequences in a literal, physical sense. Scripture does teach that sin at times can lead to death. This was true of Ananias and Sapphira, in Acts 5. If that is true, then John is discouraging prayer because it would mean praying for the dead. While this is possible, the context tells us that the contrast is with “spiritual life,” so that spiritual, rather than physical, death is the most natural reading of the text.

Although these suggestion have some biblical warrant, are they what John is concerned about? If his major emphasis in this letter is that only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God have eternal life, then the sin that leads to death, the sin that excludes us from the life of God, must be the denial of that truth. That sin leads to death because it rejects the only means by which sin can be forgiven: the atoning death of the incarnate Son of God. As one scholar puts it, “It is not that this sin is unpardonable, but that it remains unpardoned.”

Another commentator writes:

It is possible to close the heart against the influences of God’s Spirit so obstinately and persistently that repentance becomes a moral impossibility. Just as the body may starve itself to such an extent as to make digestion, or even reception of food, impossible; so the soul may go on refusing offers of grace until the very power to receive grace perishes.

But let us not allow this difficult exception blind us to John’s exhortation. There is nothing here about a Christian believer committing the sin that leads to death; only an admission that such a sin exists. The exhortation is that when we see a brother or sister becoming enmeshed in some sin, it is our privilege and responsibility to pray with confidence that he or she will be given life, i.e. be restored to that full fellowship with God and the body which sin spoils. James reminds us to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another “that you may be healed.” Perhaps the most important stimulus to bring a straying brother and sister to repentance is our prayers.

So we have a new assurance in prayer.

Secondly, says John (verse 18),

II. We Have a New Attitude Toward Sin

We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him. (5:18)

Christians do not continue in a lifestyle of sin. We have traveled over this ground already. It should be foundational truth. It is a statement that is true of every believer, everyone “who has been born of God.” We know better by now than to think that this verse teaches that Christians cannot sin, and that if we do we haven’t been born of God.

As we have already seen, the verb “to sin” is in the present tense: “no one continues to sin.” In fact, John began his letter by reminding us that if we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar. There is no special level of spirituality or holiness that is available to a special few. John is speaking about a lifestyle. No Christian continues to sin as he did before he came to Christ. The reason is that “the one who was born of God keeps him safe.”

It is Christ himself who keeps God’s children safe so that Satan cannot touch them. That word “touch” is a weak translation. It means “to fasten oneself,” and as such, to harm someone. He may—and will—attack God’s children, but he cannot gain a foothold; he cannot succeed in getting them back into his grip. Jesus himself guaranteed this as he promised his disciples: “I give [my sheep] eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (John 10:28-30).

Let this truth encourage us this morning. As we struggle against sin in our lives we can do so with confidence rather than despair. Our Protector is stronger than our enemy, more alert and more concerned than we can ever be. “Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.”

We have a new attitude toward sin.

Thirdly, John reminds us (verse 19),

III. We Have a New Relationship to the World

We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. (5:19)

Here is a third great truth that Christians know and affirm: We know that we belong to God and not to this world. We know this is true by the evidence of change in our lives. We have been born from above. We no longer have a resistant will, but rather desire to obey God. We love one another.

It is an issue of Lordship. The world “lies in the power of the evil one.” It is dominated by the devil who fiercely controls it and organizes its activities to express his own hatred toward God and his children. You only need read today’s newspaper to know that is true. Take your pick of continents: Look at Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia. And yet, by contrast, God controls his children with his light and his love.

But along with that we need to remember that Scripture teaches that the devil is a created being, subject to God’s authority. He is not allowed to act apart from God’s permission. His ultimate doom is assured. And so the freedom that the devil offers apart from God is an illusion. It is slavery.

All of our compulsive behavior, whether it is alcohol, drugs, pornography, immorality or gambling, are merely attempts to escape from this world and find some sense of personal satisfaction.

But apart from God that raging thirst will never be satisfied. It is like drinking salt water: The more you drink the more you want; the more you want the less you are satisfied. That is the devil’s plan.

And what is true on an individual level is also true on an international level, whether militarily or politically. The tyranny of sin is selfishness. Thoughtful and concerned people articulate the problems but the world does not have the power to solve them. The world lies in the grip of the evil one. We know that this is so and we know why.

Because this is true it is essential that we as the church not try to preserve our distinctives in a sealed environment, detached from the world and its problems. We need to remember that our Lord commissioned us to go into the world, not to withdraw from it. We are to be in the world, though we are not of it. Our attitude is not one of indifference or separation, but of involvement and compassion, as we model our Savior before a dying world. We are to be salt and light.

One man has written,

I simply argue that the cross be raised again
at the center of the marketplace
as well as on the steeple of the church,

I am recovering the claim that
Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral
between two candles:

But on a cross between two thieves
on a town garbage heap;

At a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan
that they had to write his title
in Hebrew and Latin and Greek...

And at the kind of place where cynics talk smut,
and thieves curse and soldiers gamble.

Because that is where He died,
and that is what he died about.

And that is where Christ’s men ought to be,
and that is what church people ought to be about.

In the words of Jude, “Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them” (Jude 21-23).

And finally, says the apostle (verses 20-21),

IV. We Have a New Understanding of God

And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, guard yourselves from idols. (5:20-21)

This last conviction is the foundation of the three preceding it. “We know that the Son of God has come...in order that we might know Him...and we are in Him.”

Our faith is grounded in what God has done in history, in Christ. We know that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4:2), and that he came by “water and blood” (5:6). His coming “has given us understanding,” i.e. the power or capacity of knowing, of seeing. John says, “We saw him, we felt him, we lived with him. We can testify that he has given us understanding. We began to see life as it really is.

He stripped it of its illusions.” He has enabled us to know him who is true, or better, “real.” He is the ultimate reality.

Not only do we know him, but we are “in Him.” Unlike the world, which is under the control of the evil one, we are in God, sharing his very life. We are in God as he is in us. In Christ we are as close as we possibly could be. God shares with us his own indestructible life, the life of the age to come.

What tremendous privileges! This is the fellowship with the Father and the Son that John introduced us to earlier as the essence of eternal life. We have come full circle. How tremendous are these great, unshakable, foundational truths on which our faith rests! They have been shared with the explicit purpose that we might know that these things are objectively true and real in our own life. We do know that these things are true and nothing need shake that assurance. For at its heart lies the unmovable truth that, by God’s grace, we know him and are in him.

No wonder John closes with the admonition, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.” Here is our responsibility. An idol is anything that occupies the place due to God. It is an imitation or substitute, not reality. It may be made of wood, or stone, or metal, it may be carved and shaped by a craftsman, but it is unlikely that John was thinking of such objects. His concern was with the false ideas and heretical concepts about God to which the church was being subjected.

That warning is just as appropriate today. Our twentieth century idols are no less crude than those of the first century. Though the names have been changed, the idols are exactly the same.

There is the worship of Narcissus, the god who fell in love with himself. That may be the supreme god our age. We think we are so clever we can do anything. Even in evangelical circles we find many who think they know God so well that they can predict his responses and even condition them. Consequently, what they end up worshipping is not the true God but an idol of their own making, a thinly veiled excuse for worshipping themselves.

We have the worship of Bacchus, the god of pleasure. Every week in my office I do battle with those who tell me that God wants them to be happy and fulfilled. They can’t be happy with their present circumstances, they tell me.

We have the worship of Venus, the goddess of love; of Apollo, the god of physical beauty; of Minerva, the goddess of science. They are all here.

“Little children, guard yourself from idols.” Do not give your attention, time or energy to anything that squeezes God out of that central position in your life. Anything that does so must be ruthlessly destroyed. Any notion of God which contradicts his perfect revelation in Jesus Christ must be rejected.

I want to close this morning with one of my favorite stories out of the book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. The main character is a shiny new stuffed rabbit who is in the process of becoming real. He wants to be more than just a toy sitting on a shelf. As he struggles with his initial feelings of uneasiness he meets an old, worn-out stuffed horse. In a way, the horse reminds me of the apostle John. John is a wise, loving man who understands what it means to be real and he shares with all of us young rabbits who long to live significant lives what it means to be real.

The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once?” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

“Little Children, guard yourselves from idols!”

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