

**An Introduction to John's First Letter:
The Epistle of Christian Certainty**

“These things have I written unto you who believe ... that you may know that you have eternal life (5:13)”.

I. Introduction 1:1-4

The apostle introduces us to the topic of the book, eternal life. He writes about the message that the life-giving Word gave to the apostles, and to us, when he was among them.

II. The Reality of Fellowship: Stated, 1:5-2:2

We have argued that the book can be viewed as having two principal parts. Here the apostle tells us that knowing God, walking with God, having fellowship with God, must be based on the righteous character of God (v. 5).

John makes the point that we do not need to deceive ourselves about the presence of sin in our lives. He makes three points in a statement-denial-correction pattern. The errors are found following the three “If we say” occurrences.

- A. That sin does not remain within us because the moment of redemption brings immediate cleansing: the argument of antinomianism or the Law having been abolished (1:6-7).
- B. That in the moment of redemption the sin nature is eradicated: the argument that the cause of sin is has been fully removed from us (1:8-9).
- C) That the sin nature continues in us, but there is a time in our lives when our struggles can be put to death: the argument of a beatific plateau (1:10-2:2).

God's standards of fellowship have been met and are being met by Christ. We can know that we know Him because of Christ's righteous character, His satisfaction for our sins through His sacrificial death on Calvary, and His constant advocacy for us.

III. The Reality of Fellowship: Tested, 2:3-5:20

Now, the apostle turns to tests or evidence that we do have fellowship, that we do know Christ, though sin is present in all our lives. John's point seems to be that the miracle of fellowship with God is a life-changing experience. The effects of knowing God, as well as the knowing of Him, are grounds of assurance. Our experience with God and our works are grounds of assurance for us.

Profession must match practice, not perfection! John lists five evidences of a gracious work of God in our lives.

A. The Test of Obedience, 2:3-17

1. The standard stated: the commandments, vv. 3-6

a. Stated, v. 3

Here we have a practical test of verbal profession. "By this we know" occurs ten times in the epistle (twice in this chapter, four times in chapter 3, twice in chapter four, and once in chapter five). See John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments".

b. Contrasted, v. 4

This sentence is the converse of the preceding one. Three times in this chapter the phrase, "the one who says," appears (vv. 6, 9). It functions much the same way as "if we say" (vv. 6, 8, 10) in chapter one. It introduces a false statement.

c. Compared, vv. 5-6

The character of God is displayed in those who know Him and that is assuring evidence that we know Him. The fruit indicates the root!

It is clear in comparing "abides in Him (v. 6)" with "know[s] Him (v. 4)" that they are equivalent terms. The words "know," "fellowship," and "abides" are synonyms.

While obedience is a sign of knowing God and disobedience of ignorance of God, how absolute are these ideas? Obedience is not about perfection or sinlessness as indicated in 1:6-2:2. F.F. Bruce an obvious point, "John characteristically sees life in terms of black and white; intermediate greys have no existence for him." I think the issue is the general tendency and desires we have, not perfection.

2. The standard illustrated, vv. 7-17

a. Positively: Love of one another, vv. 7-11

1) The commandment stated, vv. 7-8

The shift from the plural ("commandments [v. 3]") to the singular ("commandment, v. 7") is likely because John sees all the commands fulfilled in one commandment, love.

How can an old commandment be simultaneously new (v. 8)? The old is the commandment they heard from Jesus from the very first they met Him. It is new in two ways: first, it is constantly being realized in the life of Jesus' followers and, second, it is new regarding the greater explanation of it in Jesus for us.

2) The contrast of the commandment applied, v. 9

To walk in the “light” (to know God, to fellowship with God, to abide in God) is evidenced by a walk in love (see 1:6).

- 3) A general principle deduced, vv.10-11
 - a) The general principle stated positively, v. 10
Love is evidence of life and, thereby, is a ground of assurance.
 - b) The general principle stated negatively, v.11
Hate, lack of preference for another, is evidence of a lack of life.
A person can be safe in the “darkness” if they stand still; if they move about, they might stumble. John uses light and darkness metaphorically for life and lostness respectively.
- b. Negatively: Separation from the world, vv. 12-17
 - 1) The addressees of the commandment, vv. 12-14
The purpose in addressing his reader is to assure them of their Christian status.

Our scholars are puzzled to explain the duplication of the three-fold encouragement that prefaces this section. In the first statement of age groups the present tense is used, in the second the past tense. Is this significant? Also, different words are used for children. The sequence of age categories is the same in each repetition.

Also, should we translate the introductory word “because’ or “that”. Is John stating a reason for a fact or is he making a declaration of a fact. I think the former is preferable if the reason for writing is one of assurance.

The major problem is how to take the words “little children,” “fathers,” and “young men”. Should we interpret them literally as age categories or figuratively of spiritual stages of development? If non-literally interpreted, does it refer to three groups or one group described three ways? I take it that John is using a rhetorical device, metaphors. He is expressing general spiritual truths that ought to apply to all his readers. As Marshall notes: “All Christians should have the innocence of childhood, the strength of youth, and the mature knowledge of age”. A hint that we should not take these designations literally is how John addresses his readers (“my little children [2:1, 12; 2:18, 3:18; 4:4; 5:21], “my children [2:13], and “Little children [2:18]). Further, the order of age groups seems to imply this (you would expect an age listing from the most aged).

The address to the “fathers” is the same in the duplication (vv. 13, 14). The address to “little children” is different as also to “young men”. For “children” the reality of sins forgiven (v. 12) and knowing the father (v. 13) are synonyms. “Young men” in each case have overcome the “evil one” (v. 13) though it is elaborated in the repetition (v. 14). The verb tenses are all the same; they suggest past action continuing into the present.

2) The appeal of the commandment, vv. 15-17

a) The nature of the appeal, v. 15a

The command is clear, but the question is: if God loved the world (John 3:16) why should we not? The word, “world,” has a wide range of meanings. As used here, it means the system arrayed against God (I John 5:19). The world, as people, we are to love; the world as a system of values opposed to God and under the control of the devil we are to shun.

Worldliness does not reside in things, but it does reside in our concentration and conformity to things.

b) The reasons for the appeal, v. 15b-17

1) The incompatibility of the two loves, vv. 15b-16.

[a] Stated, v. 15a

John admits to no middle ground. There are only two objects to love, two loves, and two destinies.

[b] Elaborated, v. 16

The “world as a system of values” has nothing to offer the child of God. It is a system antithetical to the Christian’s values and can be summarized as “base desires, false values, and egoism”. It is the devil’s trinity of alluring values.

“Lust of the flesh” speaks of our inward inordinate desires or our depraved natures.

“Lust of the eyes” speaks of assaults from without as opposed to those from within. It is temptation or solicitation to do wrong things or take advantage of people.

“Pride of life” speaks an arrogance or vainglory relating to one’s external circumstances, whether it be wealth, rank, social status, or dress.

Some have seen a parallel in our Lord's three temptations (Matt. 4:1-11). However, there seems to be little evidence of an allusion here.

- 2) The impermanence of the world contrasted to the eternality of the one who loves God, v. 17.

The new age has arrived in Christ (see, 2:8) and this world is passing away. The values of this world are temporal.

Applications

1. Preferring the welfare of others above ourselves is evidence that we have come into a new world, into the kingdom of God. The experience of forgiveness is values changing.
2. A change in attitudes toward others is proof that we are the children of a new kind of father with a new destiny.
3. A consistent pattern of self-absorption should cause us pause. Are we the children of a loving Father? We all have our too-many moments, but that is not a ground of a lack of assurance because those moments are not general patterns and we confess our faults to God pleading forgiveness because of who Christ is (righteous) and what he did in the shedding of His own blood for us (His sacrificial death), that secure the appeasement of God on our behalf.
4. The character of God will be displayed in those who abide in Him, those who know Him, those who fellowship in Him. No one is allowed to imagine that he/she can get away with a claim to be a lover of God on the ground that this is an inward attitude, invisible to others.
5. While we are to love the world as God does (John 3:16), we are to associate with the immoral, covetous, idolaters, revilers, drunkards, and swindlers of the world (1 Cor. 5:9-10). We are not to adopt their values.
6. Materialism is evidence of love for the world's values. Do we really believe that this is the "shadow land" and our hearts and minds should be set on the things of heaven? Do our values reside in things, position, and accomplishments? The one effective antidote to worldliness is to have one's heart so filled with the Father's love that it has no room for any affection that is incompatible with it.