

**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 (I John 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 Christ gave to the apostles 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.

John makes the point that we do not need to deceive ourselves about the presence of sin in our lives (It is God's righteousness in us in the Spirit, not any personal righteousness. 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**

Here, 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 are grounds of assurance. Profession must match practice, not perfection! John lists five proofs of a gracious work of God in our lives.

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

An important evidence of God's great grace is a profound transformational change in our values. Though we are certainly not perfect people, the change that new life—the incoming of kingdom life, the life of God—is dramatic. The world's value system is now seen as empty, shortsighted, and impermanent. We have come to value God's commandment and love one another.

**B. The Test of Fidelity to the Apostle's Teachings, 2:18-29**

John's point in this section is that false teachers cannot sway true believers away from the apostle's teachings. Believers can sense error and are not enamored by it, although the teacher of it may be attractive and persuasive. This is evidence that we are God's children.

C. The Test of Moral Purity, 3:1-4:6

1. The basis of a life of purity: the Blessed Hope, 3:1-3

a. The cause, v. 1

With the incoming of God, the experience of His love, a net side effect is that the world has become alien to us and to our new values. Though the world of mankind does not know God, what it knows of Him has not softened their hearts toward Him.

What a marvelous privilege we have that God should call us His children!

b. The realization, v. 2

What we are now is not to be compared to what we shall be at the appearance of the Lord in *the* last day; it will be more wonderful than we can imagine. Charles Wesley wrote:

“And if our fellowship below  
In Jesus be so sweet  
What heights of rapture shall we know  
When round His throne we meet.”

Dottie Rambo (1934-2008) composed the lyrics of a favorite “We shall Behold Him,” that has touched all of us because of its depiction of our Lord's triumph and our longing for it. “We shall behold Him. We shall behold Him, face to face in all His glory!”

When we see Him, our journey will be over; a new, unimaginable existence will be ours (the old will have passed away forever. Our rebirth from above commences a life of progressive manifestation of our new life that will be perfected when we see the Lord!

Perfection is in our future, but we await our final redemption when the blight, the tragedy of Adam's heritage is past and we receive our new bodies, bodies capable of existence in the very presence of God. John's point is that perfectionism in this life is a false hope, progress in our hope is possible.

c. The result, v. 3

John's reason for writing about the return of Christ and the final state is not theological but ethical. The Scriptures are full of theological teachings, but the goal of the insights is the promotion of adoration and worship!

2. The characteristics of a life of purity: Righteousness and Love, vv. 4-24

To sustain the point that righteousness and love characterize the Christian, he begins with a description of what does not.

a. The practice of righteousness, vv. 4-13

John seems to be making the point that a life of sinfulness and the profession of Christian life is incompatible. While the Christian sins, some more than others, yet only at times, he or she is not characterized by it. It is something we regret doing and take no delight in it after the illusion of personal benefits disappear.

1) The nature of sin v. 4-7

a) A universal truth, v. 4

Lawlessness is the essence, not the result, of sin. The essence of lawlessness is found in the failure to love others. The intent of the Law was to promote love in all of us.

b) An appeal, v. 5

John seems to be saying that a right view of the person and work of Christ will prove a curb to our sinning.

c) A logical deduction, v. 6

Nobody who lives in Christ (abides, has fellowship, or possesses the life of God) sins, claims John. He seems to be saying that the Christian is sinless. This, however, contradicts what he has said in 1:6-2:2 and his exhortation against sinning throughout the epistle. Remember, he is writing to "my children (2:1)."

Though scholars approach this verse from various perspectives (notorious crimes, a distinction between the old and new natures, a descriptive ideal, or willful or deliberate sin), it seems that the conclusions of the translators of the NIV have a sensible solution. They stress that the verb "sin" is in the present tense suggesting continuous action ("practices"). Christians are folks who sin, but not with a heartless, calloused, habitual disregard for God and His holiness. Instead, we confess our shortcomings (1:9). The reason for our lack of habitually sinning is the Holy Spirit (the "seed," the "anointing" [3:9) and the protective mercies of God (5:18).

d) A clarification, v. 7

John's point is the incompatibility of being a Christian and continuing in sin habitually. There must have been people who contested his teaching and

who were trying to mislead the flock. John repeats and amplifies the point in fatherly terms.

2) The origin of sin, vv. 8-13

a) A fact, v. 8

Sin is incompatible with the character of God but is consistent with the devil whose character has stood in antithesis to God's from the beginning (John 8:44). Morally, his work is enticement to sin; physically, the infliction of disease; intellectually, seduction into error. Christ's mission to earth was to undo his grip on the world. The devil is still busy doing his wicked works, but he has been defeated; in Christ, we can escape from his tyranny.

b) A logical conclusion, v. 9

John seems to expand the point he stated in verse six. Here, however, he states the two reasons. On the surface, it looks like he is saying that Christians are constitutionally incapable of sinning (a clear contradiction of 1:6-2:22 and the exhortations in the book).

The first statement is that the Christian does not sin. This, as stated above, suggests present, oncoming action. The usage of the present tense of the verb "sins" demonstrates an exhibition of settled character like that of the devil (3:8).

The second statement is that the Christian "cannot sin." Again, it is not an isolated act of sin that John envisioned, but the settled habit of it as indicated by the present tense verb (to do or to practice).

The reason is two-fold: the rebirth to an entirely new orientation (the life of God, not that of the devil) and the indwelling "seed." The "seed" is the life of God in us—the indwelling Holy Spirit.

We see evidence of His presence in the nine fruit or manifest of the character of God (Gal. 5: 22). The new birth and the new nature exert a strong internal pressure towards holiness.

c) A summary, v. 10

This verse is a summary, a conclusion, and a transition to what follows. The lifestyle of those in Satan's domain is vastly different from those in God's kingdom. This is evident in our social relationships—our regard for others.

d) An illustration, vv. 11-12

[1] A command, v. 11

The message from the very first hearing of Christ, says John, was that we should love one another.

[2] A negative illustration, v. 12

The mutuality love commanded of us stands in vivid contrast to how Cain treated Abel (Gen. 4:1-8). Since faith is always a response to God's commands and promises, we may assume that God had revealed His will to them. Love is the response of faith; hatred, that is murder, the response of faithlessness.

e) The conclusion, v. 13

Cain is a prototype of the world. The "world" is Cain's posterity; we are not to marvel at it. "Cain" stands opposed to everything Christian. Cain was willfully disobedient (Jude 11); Abel acted in faith (Heb. 11:4). The life of the Christian is so vastly different than those of the world, not so much at times in external behavior but is motive and object for acting (we do it out of love for God). See. Matt. 10:24-25 and John 15:18-20).

b. The Manifestation of love, vv. 14-24

1) Love stated, vv. 14-16

a) The fact stated, v. 14

"We know," a ground of assurance, that we are Christians because we have evidence that there has been a fundamental reorientation of our lives and priorities. The "we" in "we know" is in the emphatic position; it is being emphasized.

b) The fact in contrast, v. 15

Is a murderer excluded from eternal life? The point is about the opposite of love expressed as a habit or one's settled character. See I Cor. 6:9-12 ("such were some of you").

c) The fact illustrated, v. 16

The greatest example of love for us was Christ in His voluntary judgment in our place at Calvary. This illustration of love is how we are to love others (i.e., sacrificially).

2) Love explained, vv. 17-24

a) Stated, vv. 17-18

Love is the willingness to surrender that which has value for our own life, to enrich the life of another.

It is interesting that John closes verse 16 with the plural ("brethren") but shifts to the singular ("brother") here.

b) Implications, vv. 19-24

[1] Confidence before God, vv. 19-20

The mind is the guardian of the

heart. If we love each other and share with those in need, we should remember that when our heart entertains doubts that question our relationship to Christ.

Love is an objective test of our Christian profession because true love, in the sense of self-sacrifice, is not natural to man in his fallen state.

The heart accuses, the mind defends, and God is our judge! How do you gain peace when your heart or conscience condemns you? Think about what you were like before God came into your life.

[2] Answers from God, vv. 21-22

John turns from the curse of the condemning heart to the blessings of a tranquil heart. It gives us boldness in prayer. The reason God answers our prayers is not a heart at peace; it is a heart submissive to the will of God as evidence by obedience. Obedience is evidence that we are in harmony with God.

[3] An explanation, v. 23

The commandments of God can be reduced to two as Jesus instructed in Matthew 22:37-40. We are to embrace God believingly and love one another.

[4] Assurance, v. 24

Assurance of fellowship with God comes to us through finding the workings of the Spirit in our lives. Where there is obedience and love, there is the life of God. Obedience to the Lord's commandments is not the cause but the proof of His people's dwelling in Him.

3. The discernment of truth from error, 4:1-6

John seems to be continuing with the point that fruitfulness—in other words, faith and love—is the truest evidence of Christian profession. Also, he seems to have returned to the theme in 2:18-27.

a. The existence of lying spirits, v. 1

Instead of being gullible, we must be discerning. "All that glitters is not gold," an old saying goes.

The Old Testament provides two tests for false teachers (false prophets).

1) If the word they speak does not come true, they are false prophets (Deut. 18:22).

2) If the word they speak comes true, but in the process, they lead away from the true God, they are false prophets (Deut. 13:1-15).

b. The discernment of truth from error, vv. 2-6

1) Their teaching, vv. 2-3

a) Positively, v. 2

False teachers are those who deny that Jesus came to reveal eternal life to us (I John 1:1-3). It is more than a denial of the incarnation; it is a denial that He brought to us the way of salvation.

b) Negatively, v. 3

As John has said before (2:21-23), you cannot deny the mission of the Son and belong to the Father because the Son came to reveal the Father. The Father and Son are inseparable!

2) Our assurance, vv. 4-6

a) The surety, v. 4

The promise of the indwelling Spirit; He is greater than false teachers.

b) The nature of false teachers, v. 5

False teachers are of the world and their followers are of the world.

c) Conclusion, v. 6

We are of God because we embrace God's Son. The litmus test of true fellowship with Christ is obedience to Him.

## Thoughts

1. We should think often about the return of the Lord. It will remind us that the things we see about us are temporal.
2. A person who professes to know Christ but habitually acts unlike Him should seriously question the genuineness of their profession.
3. A Christian is not a person who always gets it right; he/she is a person who confesses when they get it wrong. Murderers will be in heaven, but not one whose disposition to hate has gone unchanged by the Spirit of God.
4. Fellowship, life in the sinless one, and indulgence in sin are a contradiction in terms.
5. The realm of light and the realm of love are one and the same realm, the realm in which the children of God are united in their heavenly Father.
6. No matter how charming, how plausible, or how eloquent a teacher may appear to be, the test of his witness to Christ and His truth is the test by which he must be judged.