

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 73

I John

I. BACKGROUND

The letter we know as First John is a bit unlike the other letters in the New Testament, save Hebrews. It is an anonymous letter. Nowhere does the author set out his name. Similarly, the author does not tell us any identifying specifics about the recipients.

So, why is this letter called First John? The reasons for John's authorship are fairly well understood. First, the author clearly claims to have been an eyewitness of Jesus. He writes as one who has "seen," "heard," and felt Jesus. The writing itself has an unmistakable tone of apostolic authority. John was loath to identify himself even in his gospel. We should not be surprised to find the same approach here.

John's authorship is also attested to heavily in church history. We have a letter from Polycarp that dates from early in the second century. Polycarp was one of the Apostle John's disciples. Polycarp writes in clear echoes of 1 John 4:2-3. This writing certifies the early authorship of the epistle and at least gives credence to the early church tradition of John's authorship. In the first listing we have of New Testament books (called the "Muratorian Canon" dating around 170), we have 1 John included. There is a great deal of other church tradition that ascribes the book to John as well.

If we compare this letter to the gospel of John, we find similar vocabulary, similar style, and several clear references to the gospel. Both books start out referencing the "beginning." There are also references to the Nicodemus story from John 3 as well as other similar phrases.

John wrote the epistle somewhere around the end of the first century. The epistle is 25 to 30 years after the writings of Peter and Paul. Much happened to the church in those intervening years. All of the apostles of Jesus were dead, save the apostle John. The Christian community had severed most ties with Judaism after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The Jerusalem Jewish community, including the Jewish Christians, dispersed into the world after that time. History tells us that John went to Ephesus where he was the church authority for the churches in Asia Minor until his death. According to the Muratorian canon, John wrote this letter at the bequest of his congregations to set out certain truths and counsel.

The letter attacks certain heresies that were brewing in the church. There were particular problems with folks who believed that morality was irrelevant to the Christian (“antinomianism”). Cerinthus also taught a particular heresy. This heresy was an early type of Gnosticism (taken from the Greek word for “knowledge” – more on this in Church History Literacy!). Cerinthus taught that Jesus was a man born of Mary and Joseph (as opposed to the virgin birth). There was nothing particularly divine about Jesus until his baptism. At that point, the Spirit of God descended on Jesus (remember the dove?) and Jesus was divine right up to the point of the crucifixion. On Calvary, the Spirit left Jesus and watched the scene play out. In short, Cerinthus taught that matter and flesh were evil, while spiritual unseen matters were good. So, the Messiah was never flesh and blood for then, the Messiah would be evil. Christ was always spirit, no more. John writes a strong refutation to this belief.

II. TEXT

Like his gospel, John starts his letter referencing the beginning. In the gospel, John echoed the words of Genesis one with “In the beginning was the word....” In this letter, John first writes, “What was from the beginning....” John wants there to be no question where he stands on the reality of Jesus; so, he writes that “What was from the beginning” was something he had “heard” with his ears, something he had “seen” with his eyes,” and something he had “handled” with his hands. This physical being was the “Word of Life,” a life manifested or made evident in the man Jesus whom John had actually seen and heard. This was no apparition, dream, or vision. This was the Eternal Life that was with the Father but came to earth as a man.

Because of Jesus, this real person, John had fellowship with God. Through his witness, John also had fellowship with the Christians reading the letter, just as those Christians had fellowship with God and Jesus.

In this regard, a moment on the word “fellowship” is useful. It is the Greek word *koinonia* which means a “commonness,” a “sharing.” It is a knitting together of people around something. Much like the hub of a wheel is the meeting place for the spokes. This commonness has an earthly or horizontal element, as we, the church, share together. It also has a vertical element. Because the same tie that binds us as family is the tie that binds us to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (1:1-4).

About God, John has several things to say. God is “light.” Not just a bright light or indirect light, but God is 100% pure light. In him is “no darkness.” If we understand light as purity, then God is 100% pure. If we understand light as the source of life, then God is the only source of life. If we know light to be eye opening to reality and truth, then God is 100% real truth. God is not partially what we need. He is not some of the guidance for life. He is not “sort of” our source and answer. He and he alone is the total fulfillment of our every need.

Now, because God is so pure and 100% light, we are walking with him in fellowship only when we walk in light. We cannot be doing the deeds of darkness and claim that we are fellowshiping with God. God would and could have no part of darkness. Our fellowship with God, our commonness and sharing with God, is found when we walk in the light. When we walk in truth and God’s own character, we have fellowship with him. Our sins are forgiven and we dwell within the very presence of God.

John is careful to point out that he is not advocating some earthly perfection on our part. In fact, he adds that if we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and telling a lie! In other words, we sin merely in saying we do not sin!

John does not mean that our fellowship is based on being perfect. When he speaks of walking in the light, he means living our lives oriented to God, focused on his goodness and holiness, and trying by the strength of his Spirit to live accordingly. We do not achieve God’s perfection, but we strive to do right and live as he would have us live. This includes confessing our sins, and we walk with him then because he forgives our sins (1:5-10).

With compassion, John begins chapter two addressing his readers as “My little children.” John relates that his purpose in writing to them was to help them in holiness. John wants his readers not to sin. Even while stating such, John then adds that they must know that when they do sin, they have Jesus Christ as an advocate before the Father. And, what an advocate we have in Jesus. Jesus himself is the “propitiation” for our sin. “Propitiation” references that Jesus himself paid the penalty for our sin. John adds that Jesus did so, not just for us, but for the whole world.

This news is wonderful news for those who know Jesus. This is the basis of our fellowship with God. This is what we live for and long for. This is the answer to life’s most ultimate human questions: Who are we? What are we here for? Why do we feel there is more to life? We are people

separated from God by sin. We are made to be in fellowship with him, and by the death of Jesus, we have a basis for knowing God.

When John speaks of knowing God, he is using a word that is important in multiple aspects. First, the word itself denotes an intimate relationship, not a mere intellectual awareness or acquaintance. We are intimately tied to God. Second, the word was a key gnostic term that was used in reference to “hidden knowledge” among the Gnostics that lead to a supposedly higher level of spirituality. Yet for John, knowing God is basic and simple. It is an intimate relationship founded on the saving work of Jesus Christ. One way we know when we are in this relationship is by examining our lives. When we try to honor and keep God’s instructions, it is a sure fire indication we are people of faith and that God is at work in our lives. By the same token, if we claim to be people of faith, but live with a reckless disregard for God and his instructions, then we are lying to others and ourselves. People with no care for what God has said are not people who are close to God (2:1-6).

John writes that his message here is both new and not new! It is not new in the sense that it is the message that came with their first conversion. Truth be told, it the message of the ages handed down from the beginning of time. However, it is also a new message. New in the sense of fresh, new in the sense that we are forgiven moment by moment. We are in fellowship with God day by day. New in the sense that our darkness recedes more and more as we learn and walk more in his light.

John notes another way to tell that our faith is genuine. As we love those around us, we see that we are sharing in God’s character. If we hate our brother, but claim to be God’s children walking in his light, we are wrong. God does not hate our brother. How could we be people of hate and be in fellowship or common sharing of God? Hate of others is darkness, not light (2:7-12).

John then writes a message broken down into age groups. He writes to “little children,” to “fathers,” to “young men,” and to “children.” His reference to “little children” is likely his reference to all readers. It is a reference he uses multiple times throughout his letter. So in 2:12, he notes that he is writing to “you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for His name’s sake.” But, John then breaks down the readers into “fathers,” “young men,” and “children.” We may fairly assume that John is writing with a bit of focus on the older and the younger audience.

To the “fathers,” John writes to them as men who know God intimately, to men who understand God as the God of eternity. To the “young men,” John addresses their strength. John sees them as ones who have overcome the evil one, with the word of God abiding in them. John encourages these to not love the world nor things in the world. John emphasizes that these worldly things, including lust of the flesh and eyes as well as the boastful pride of life, is not from God. It is temporary as opposed to eternal.

To the “children,” John writes about the antichrist. He references that while the “antichrist is coming,” many antichrists have already arisen. John warns the readers that there are many who claim to be of God and his kingdom, but who are in fact falsehoods. Anyone who denies God the Father and God the Son as to their person or work is not of the church, regardless of whatever else they may say!

John wants his readers to abide in Christ and God the Father. He wants them to stay tucked under the wing of eternal God. He wants them living lives that show God, his love, and his truth to the world (2:12-29).

John was still amazed at the love God had for us. Writing in his 80’s, John’s astonishment over God is evident from each phrase he composes. He writes, “See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God!” And, that is what we are. We are children of the one God who created all things. We are his very own children. Now, the world will not see this or understand it. For the world does not have the relationship with God we do. How can non-children understand the life of a child? By the same token, to the extent we draw our meaning and understanding from the world, we will not understand just how amazing and incredible life is for us.

Because we still live in this life span, because we live in the “now” and the “not yet,” we are now God’s children, set apart and changed from the world. However, we do not yet know what we shall be when He appears and we are made like him as we see him face to face.

In the meantime, we live focused on doing right by our God and father. We try to avoid sin, knowing he died to remove the sin from us. Sin is a serious matter to us. It not only killed our Lord in his earthly walk, but we also know it to be the fruit of the Devil. Jesus is about destroying Satan’s work. Far be it from us to indulge in Satan’s work! (3:1-12)

So as we are about doing the work of God rather than the work of Satan, to some degree, we set ourselves against the fallen world and its people as well. The world will not be fond of us. We should not be shocked that we are hated by some of the world. We stand for something that flies in the face of the world's values.

If the world lives for "self" and we do not, then we will certainly be out of step with the world. We are to live for others, tending to the needs we see as we have ability. This is yet another way we know God is working in us. God gave his life for us, and when we see that we love others, not just with our words but with our deeds, then we can know it is the same God at work in us.

John is sensitive to our need to know God is at work within us. John writes about those times where we might question how genuine our own faith is. John says there are times where our head needs to trump what our heart might be feeling. Our faith is not one of feeling but one of knowing. So when our hearts might condemn us, we can confidently answer our hearts with the conscious awareness that we belong to him. We have put our trust in him, and he is faithful to answer that trust. He abides in us and will work in our lives (3:13-24).

John writes in chapter four about others who might be teaching the Christians. John teaches them not to believe everyone who teaches, but to test "the spirits" to see whether they are from God. Those who confess that Jesus was real, that Jesus was God come in the flesh, are those confessing the truth. But, the gnostic teachers who denied the reality of Jesus were against truth and God. These were antichrists and deceivers (4:1-6).

Where does this leave the believer? John recalls the theme he has trumpeted since the beginning of his letter. He urges the readers to love each other deeply and in very real ways. Our motivation for loving is simple. It is not because others deserve our love, nor is it because others will reward our love. We love because of God. God first loved us, and that love has transformed us. We have taken on his nature. Just as he first loved us, so we love others. And as we love others in this way, we see God's love growing and maturing in us.

So, we love because he first loved us. As we love, we grow in faith. We have no fear of man or Satan. Fear takes a backseat to the confidence we have in God and Jesus. His mature love drives out fear (4:7-21).

John begins his final chapter with words that remind us of the Nicodemus story John related in the third chapter of his gospel. Jesus told Nicodemus that unless a man be born again, he would not see the kingdom. Here in 1 John 5, we read John saying that whoever believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, is born of God.

But, our life does not end with this rebirth. We are able to see how we focus on the important things of living to please our heavenly Father, and we take joy in doing right by him. We share in Jesus and his overcoming of the world by our lives. We have God in all three persons confirming our reborn lives. Not only do the three persons in the Godhead confirm our reality in him, but the three elements do also: The Spirit that indwells us, the water of baptism, and the blood of Christ (which is our communion service) (5:1-12).

John wrote these things to believers so they would more fully understand with confidence their secure eternity with God. John wanted them to know as they were in fellowship with God that they had the ear of God. God would hear and honor them, as they were honoring their Father. Jesus was a reality, not a fiction. Jesus was God made flesh, not an apparition. Faith was a real choice in life, not a mystical leap. John wrote of eternal truth (5:13-21).

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Jesus is real.
2. Our Faith is real.
3. Let your mind reassure your heart.
4. Love each other.
5. Love holiness.