

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 46

1 John Part 3 – Final Thoughts

Don't laugh. I was recently given the honor of being named "Distinguished Alumnus" of my middle school. As part of my journey back to Mackenzie Junior High, I was asked to give a 15-minute speech to the current students. (Yes, we also sang the school song which has not changed in over 40 years since I was there.)

This caused me to reflect back on memories of my time spent there. As I told the students, I was not anything too special while at Mackenzie. For the first year or so, my life was roughly the equivalent of the walls of the school – something people passed by, but really took no notice. By the time I finished there and moved on to high school, I had developed friendships and found the things that seemed to fit my personality best, setting me on a course of study that would ultimately bring my life here today. But it was rough going!

As insignificant as my personal life in middle school was, I contrast my wife Becky. I met Becky in middle school, and while I was just another student, she shone in brilliance. (She still does.) Let me brag for a moment. My wife was class favorite, Hall of Fame (read that teacher's favorite), head cheerleader, winner of the I Dare You award, etc. I do tease her that her Most Likely to Succeed award was surely just a premonition of whom she would marry... but more likely of who our five children are!

My memories of middle school are of key events and key people. I remember certain teachers and assignments. I remember being sent to the office for a fist fight (confession is good for the soul). I met some people who would become important parts of my life later, and those seeds of importance were sown then. As I look back, the memories are precious to me as they have become part of who I am today.

Scripture is, in some ways, like my foray through middle school. It was never so much about me, but about the key things that have shaped me. In First John, for example, I have found over the forty years I have spent studying it, certain passages that have stood out, have affected me, molding me, in part, into who I am today.

I am remiss if I fail to bring forward those passages in our study of the book. So join me in a stroll down Memory Lane as I consider certain passages in First John that have been key in my life, the fruit of study at various times over the last four decades.

FEELINGS AND THOUGHTS – 1 Jn. 3:19-20

One day in college, a classmate asked our Greek professor,

“Dr. Floyd, how do you feel about your salvation?”

Dr. Floyd looked almost put out as he responded,

“How do I *feel* about my salvation? How do I *feel*? What does it matter how I *feel* about my salvation? Let me tell you what I *think* about my salvation.”

He then went on to explain the importance of the faith he had placed in God to save him, while at the same time telling the class how unreliable feelings were. He used 1 John 3:19-20 and Psalms 42 and 43 to illustrate his point that thoughts often need to trump the heart in such matters.

1 John 3:19-20 reads,

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.

There are times where our feelings seem to falter, even for the most faithful. This is not a 21st century phenomenon. It was something John discussed over 1,900 years ago to the first century Christian community. John explained that there are things we can “know” to reassure us when our hearts tell us we are inadequate before God. The God who knows everything, who knows our darkest thoughts and deeds, that God has provided for our sins in love through Jesus Christ. We may not *feel* it, but we can *know* it. There comes a time where our minds need to trump our hearts.

This idea is also readily apparent in Psalms 42 and 43. In Hebrew, these two Psalms make one whole Psalm. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet and it takes the two psalms to make it through the Hebrew alphabet.

The psalms also fit together thematically. Both have the three streams of thought, a sample of which is in the verses set out below:

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God... My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God (Ps. 42:1, 3-6).

The first thought is the emotional longing of the writer. The psalmist does not feel connected to God, and complains of the isolation felt. “My tears have been my food while they say, “Where is your God?”” The second thought is the mental response that over rules the emotional. “These things I remember...” The psalmist doesn’t let feelings win the day. Instead, the mind recalls the blessings and joys that have flowed from the earlier walk with the Lord. This leads to the third thought. “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” The psalmist in faith recognizes that the feelings of isolation are temporary. God will restore joy.

If the psalm ended there, that would be enough. Reading the rest of Psalm 42 and Psalm 43 adds to the picture, however. The Psalm goes right back to “My soul is cast down within me,” the first stream of thought, and the cycle begins again. In other words, in spite of faith, the bad feelings do not go away. Not the second time, and not the third time. So it is sometimes. But we must still remember it is not what we feel that rules the day. Feelings come and go. Our faith must be steady in the Lord who is steadfast in love. We should never let our feelings dictate our reality.

TESTING SPIRITS – 1 John 4:1ff

Eddie was a buddy of mine in debate class. He had a good command of current events, and was always ready to pick an intellectual fight. In high school, Eddie was not a Christian. He was vocal in his atheism and we had many discussions about whether or not there were legitimate grounds to believe in God or a resurrected Messiah. (I hasten to add, Eddie became a believer after high school, and grew very strong in the faith and active in church, winning others to the Lord.)

One of the Scriptures Eddie used to challenge me was 1 John 4:2. Eddie pulled out a New International Version of the Bible and read it to me,

Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh
is from God.

After showing me this passage, Eddie said, “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” He then told me, “Now, under your Bible, I am from God because I acknowledged that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.”

I knew this was a nonsense reading of the passage, I just wasn’t sure why! It took me a few years to better understand. I needed to add some church history and some Greek to my repertoire!

The important church history was discussed in the first lesson on First John. John was writing to churches that had grafted some Greek Neo-Platonic thoughts that divided the spiritual unseen from the physical seen. The unseen was viewed as superior to the seen. The Christian heresy that John confronted was that Jesus Christ

was not divine as a human. God's perfection could not be seen in a physical form, and thus Jesus, for some, was viewed as an apparition only.

To these, John says, "No, no no!" Those confessing that Jesus Christ, God incarnate, had come in the flesh are correct. Those that do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as human, i.e., those who deny the incarnation, are against Christ (or "anti-Christ.")

The addition Greek made to my understanding of this passage was the word translated by the N.I.V. as "acknowledges." This is the Greek word *homologeō* (ὁμολογέω). The Greek idea behind the word is not simply a vocal regurgitation of the phrasing. This is not some litmus test where you can challenge someone to vocalize a phrase and it will magically stop in his or her throat if they are not actual believers.

The Greek word conveys the idea of committing oneself to something. It is an assurance or promise that one concedes is true, believing it to be true. This is why the English Standard Version, and several other translations use the word "confesses" to translate the passage, "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." Of course, "acknowledges" can convey that idea as well, but it is not as readily apparent.

John gives a test of spirits for the readers in his day who were facing a certain heresy. His test for that heresy is whether or not the person in question believes with their heart, confessing or acknowledging with their lives, that Jesus Christ was really human and divine.

Later in my college years I frequently attended a church that was exploring spiritual warfare. This church would also teach the importance of testing the spirits to see if they were from God. At that point, I was already comfortable with this passage, having been driven to study it since my encounters with Eddie. I knew that the "test" was not simply acknowledging Jesus Christ in the flesh. That was the heresy confronted by John's readers. For our generation, the heresy might be quite different. We still measure and test what is taught by the Word of God. Now there are passages in the Bible and issues in the church about which there can be a genuine difference of opinion. But there are basics about who Jesus is, what Jesus did, that are core to orthodox faith. Those function to help us weigh whether one is teaching for Christ or against Christ.

Before going to the final passage, we should note that John added another "confesses" or "acknowledges" (*homologeō* - ὁμολογέω) statement later in chapter four. There John writes,

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him,
and he in God (1 Jn. 4:15).

Again another point of heresy would be any suggestion that Jesus was simply a good man, or some special moral teacher or rabbi. Jesus was *the* Son of God, in a special way unlike any one else. Believing in Jesus means that we have God indwelling in us. It also means we abide in God.

This was the promise Jesus made about those who would receive the Holy Spirit, which came on Pentecost. John recorded Jesus saying,

In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you (Jn. 14:20).

This is the nature of orthodoxy. There are core Christian beliefs that when you leave them, you leave Christianity. We cannot say Jesus was simply a good man and truly call ourselves Christians. We cannot say that Jesus Christ was not real, and truly be considered Christians. Christianity is not about the ethic. It is about the reality of what God did, coming to earth incarnated in Jesus, and dying for the sins of a sinful people.

THE ROLE OF LOVE – 1 John 4:19

I had a love-hate relationship with the writings of Francis Schaeffer. I found his stuff quite difficult to read, and as I grew, I decided it was a combination of his writing rather dense material, but also of writing fairly unclearly. I have never counted myself a good writer, so I have no room to talk, but what he wrote could often come out rather fuzzy.

One thing he wrote with clarity, however. Schaeffer would repeatedly write of the importance of love as the hallmark or calling card of the believer. This is not something new that was never very clear in Scripture. Jesus spoke of love constantly. Jesus told his followers to love not only their friends, but also their enemies (Mt. 5:43). He used the Good Samaritan story to describe a neighbor, and also taught that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, the second greatest commandment (Mt. 22:39). Jesus pronounced “Woe!” upon the Pharisees that loved seats of notoriety, but neglected the true love of God (Lk. 11:42-43).

In the Gospel of John, love takes front and center stage. John places the very incarnation as an act of love (“For God so loved the world that he gave...” Jn. 3:16). Judgment was in the world because people loved darkness rather than light (Jn. 3:19). Similarly, he contrasted those who loved their own lives over following Jesus (Jn. 12:25). He also pointed out those who loved the glory they got from men over the glory they got from God (Jn. 12:43). Over and over John spoke of the love of God for Jesus (Jn. 3:35; 5:20; 10:17), and the love Jesus had for his followers (Jn. 12:1, 23).

Jesus specifically told his apostles, and John reported it for us throughout the ages, that we are to love each other.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn. 13:34-35).

This is important! It is the principal way people will know who we are. Anyone in the world can love those who meet their needs or make them feel special. That is not the Christian calling. We are to love each other regardless of which needs of ours another person meets, regardless of how another person makes us feel. We love because Jesus loved us and taught us love.

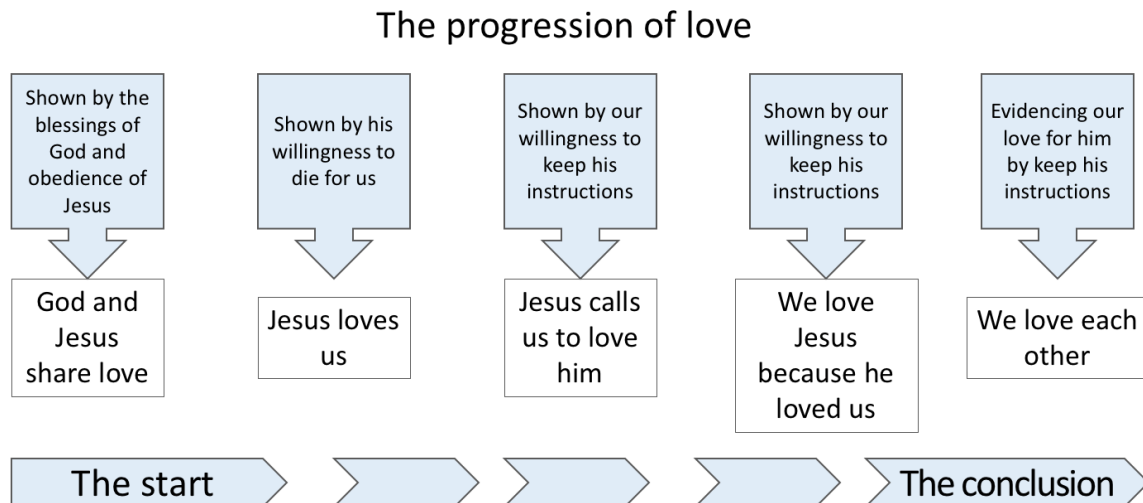
Here we understand the passage from 1 John 4:19,

We love because he first loved us.

Jesus laid down his life for us, showing us the greatest love.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends (Jn. 15:13).

There is a daisy chain here worth following:



Francis Schaeffer was right. Even as he wrote about the historical development of ideas, about issues of modern philosophy and the meaning of life, dissecting views of rationalism and existentialism, his most profound writings were the simplest. They were the instructions that people were to see our love. We show Jesus when we show love.

Of course it is critical to understand that this love is a decision, not a feeling. No one can manufacture a feeling. But we can, and certainly should, exercise a choice of caring for people. We love people when we seek their needs, and try to help them as best as we can. Showing compassion to those in pain, helping those in desperation, giving food to the hungry, these are acts of love, not of feeling!

John wrote,

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

He could not have been more clear.

MY PRAYER FOR MY CHILDREN – 3 John 4

In the third epistle of John, a short one-chapter letter with just 15 verses lies one of my favorite verses. This verse was brought to my attention by a godly woman of five children. It was her favorite verse in the Bible. I have five children. It is certainly one of mine:

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

I don't have much to add to that. I just want to emphasize it and repeat it:

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

The prayer of every believing parent is rooted in this verse.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“God is greater than our heart”* (1 Jn. 3:20).

This is a really good thing. It is really important. While it doesn't happen as often as when I was a young man, there are still times where I pause and look for God. I seek him, but don't hear him as clearly as I'd like. There are times where I don't feel as close to him as other times. It is almost as if I am in a spiritual fog, trying to find the true light that pierces the denseness.

These things I will remember: God is true. He has saved me. He has shown himself to me. My closeness to him is not based on my heart. It is based on his actions and my response. Praise God, for I will again praise him!

2. *“Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (1 Jn. 4:2).*

I love new things. I love new ideas and concepts. I learn to love new things. But I need to remember, certain things that are of old, are of truth. I might like new math, but if it teaches me that two plus two is three, I am going to get shortchanged at the store!

I want to focus on Scripture. I want to focus on the clear teachings of orthodox faith in the church. I don't embrace teachings blindly, but I search the Scripture for truth. Truth is important, and it is not found in my feelings, but in a real truth outside of me!

3. *“Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8).*

This is a decision not to be taken lightly, but one we should work on in seriousness. It is a decision to love. This is what we need to show each other and the world. God's love can shine through us and we become that city on a hill. We show the world where we are and who we are.

I am going to make that decision!