

LESSON TWENTY-FOUR:

The Epistles of John

I, II, & III John

Introduction:

The writer of the Epistles of John is not actually named in the letters which bear his name. However, their style and vocabulary clearly identify them with the writings of the one who wrote the Gospel of John. We have talked already about that Gospel and its author. There is no good reason to depart from the traditional understanding, therefore, that the writer of these epistles presently under study is the Apostle John, identified in the gospels as the son of Zebedee, along with his brother James. He was an early convert to Jesus through John the Baptist.

John, the Apostle, evidently lived a very long time and presumably spent some time as a prisoner of the Roman Empire on the Island of Patmos, during which time he wrote the Book of Revelation. We do not know just when the letters were written, but it was probably during the latter part of his life which extended to near the end of the First Century. Tradition tells us that he served for some time in Ephesus, presumably after the time of Paul's ministry there, since he is never mentioned by Paul as having been there. It is probable that John was the last of the original apostles to die, which is perhaps indicated in the words of Jesus addressed to Peter in the latter part of John's Gospel (John 21:22ff.).

What Do We Find Here?

I JOHN:

The Nature and Privilege of Eternal Life: Fellowship with God.

The first letter of John, though written in very simple Greek which can be readily mastered by the student of Greek, is not itself a simple letter. It is very difficult to comprehend the message of the whole, though its individual statements are relatively clear. I have chosen, therefore, to approach it in two ways. *First*, by looking at it in outline fashion, as we have done all the other books. By this, I mean that we shall

seek to discern the general flow of the work from beginning to end. *Then*, we shall look at it topically or logically, seeking to trace the development of the thought of John with our eye on his primary objective in writing the letter. I have also included an actual outline combining these two approaches.

In his own introduction to the epistle (1:1-4), John tells us that his desire is to share with his readers the truth about eternal life which was taught to him and the others by Jesus Christ. He stresses the fact that he and others with him were privileged to see, hear, and touch the person, Jesus Christ — the Word of life (1:1). His source of knowledge of eternal life has come solely from the Father through the Son (v.2). Such an experience resulted in his own coming to have fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ (v.3).

It is because he now wishes these, his readers, to come into that fellowship with him and other believers that he writes this letter; for he knows that fellowship with him and other believers is fellowship also with Jesus Christ and with the Father (v.3). John himself has come to know the joy in Christ of which the Lord had spoken while on earth (John 15:11, 16:24; 17:13). He now wishes that same joy to be in these, his readers (v.4).

What follows is an exposition of the blessings and privileges of having eternal life, the enjoyment of which, alone, can bring one to true appreciation of that eternal life which we have in Christ and which alone can result in that joy which John desires in those who read this epistle. We shall look now at what John teaches about the nature of eternal life as seen in the believer.

1. Eternal life (life with the Father and the Son) is life that brings all sin to the light (1:5-2:17)

The first principle of understanding this truth is that God is light and within Him is no darkness at all (1:5). Therefore, it is impossible for one who claims to have fellowship with the Father to have hidden sins — sins which have not been brought to the light but remain hidden in the heart of the believer, unconfessed (v.6). Thus, any unconfessed sin, any sin which we

have not been willing to bring to the light, hinders our fellowship with the Father and the Son (v.6). In doing so, we lie; we do not honor the truth of the gospel (v.6).

The believer need not be afraid to bring any sin before the Lord and confess it to Him. Why? Because the blood of Christ is sufficient to deal with all of our sins (v.7). We deceive ourselves when we say that we never sin. That is simply not true (v.8). Far better is to acknowledge that we have sinned and to ask God's forgiveness (v.9). After all, this is the privilege of the believer — to bring his sins to light and have them addressed. In Christ, every sin can be washed away and the righteousness of Christ can shine forth in our lives.

What John is saying here is quite similar to the Old Testament concept of the real purpose for the sacrificial system. It was designed to be a means of the believers bringing their sins to the light that they might be dealt with by a gracious God. David saw this and brought his sins to the Lord, asking for forgiveness, knowing that God wanted from him a broken heart because of his sins rather than just the offering of sacrifices (Ps. 51:16,17). One who refuses to do this, as Saul did in the Old Testament, calls God a liar, for God has said that we all sin and that we cannot deal with our sins ourselves. Thus, one who refuses to confess his sins, as though not admitting them will make them go away, is not really God's child at all. He does not have the Word of God in him and he is not the possessor of eternal life, no matter what professions of faith he may have made! (1:10)

John, of course, was not here encouraging them to sin; just the opposite, he wanted these believers to know that when they did sin, they should not cover it up or pretend to be sinless. They certainly were not sinless; rather, they were to remember that they could bring that sin to the light of God's mercy in Jesus Christ. The righteousness of Jesus Christ was more than sufficient for all of their sins (2:1-3). Indeed, Jesus' shed blood for sins was more than sufficient for the sins of the entire world! No believer, therefore, should fear that he could overdraw on the reserves of God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

God has commanded that we confess our sins to Him. This is so fundamental to the gospel that for one to refuse to do that is to expose the fact that he is not a Christian at all (2:3,4).

John had said earlier that God is light and that those who hope to have fellowship with Him must walk in the light and not in the darkness (1:5,6). Now, he goes on to say that if we expect truly to abide in the Lord, we must be certain to walk in that light (with all sins confessed and open before the Lord) (2:5,6).

One way in which our walk in the light is evident is in our concern for and love of the brethren (2:7-11). John is showing here that many who may suppose that they have not sinned and, therefore, have nothing to confess have, in reality, grossly sinned in that they have failed to show love to the brethren (fellow-believers). John states that the command to love is not new; but at the same time, since the light of the gospel has shined so brightly, the necessity for reexamining ourselves in the light of the gospel is imperative, particularly, as to the question of our love of the brethren (2:7,8).

It is vanity to say that we walk in the light (have fellowship with the Father and the Son) if, indeed, we hate our brethren (v.9). Here we should remember once again what the Scriptures say about love and hate. In Biblical usage of the term "hate," one hates who relegates others to an inferior place in respect to himself. Thus, to hate a brother is to think of oneself more highly than one thinks of, or is concerned for, another. We do not have to have feelings of malice or disgust toward another to hate him, we merely need to neglect him or to show no concern for him in order to hate him. We see this clearly illustrated in Jacob's feelings toward Rachel over Leah. On the one hand, we are told simply that he loved Rachel *more than* Leah. But God called this *hating Leah* (Gen. 29:30,31).

Thus, many who may claim to be walking in the light (have fellowship with God) are in reality in the darkness because they hate their brothers and will not acknowledge it (v.11).

John's writing to the various age levels of believers is on the basis of their knowing the gospel:

knowing that their sins are forgiven by the Lord; knowing that they know the Lord and are in fellowship with him; and knowing that in Christ they have overcome Satan (2:12-14). It is easy, however, for believers to find themselves loving the world rather than the Father. It is easy to overlook the presence of the world in the life of the believer and so to deceive oneself into thinking that he is in fellowship with the Lord when, in reality, he is not, but is rather in fellowship with the world. John notes the nature of the world which is not of Christ: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (vs.15,16). These summarizations of the nature of worldly men are quite like the very sins which ensnared Adam and Eve. Compare these with the very seduction of Eve into sin (Gen. 3:6). See also our discussion of her sin in the Old Testament Survey.

2. Eternal life (life with the Father and the Son) is life that discerns the truth from all error (2:18-29)

John uniquely, in the New Testament, uses the term “anti-Christ” to describe those who have been in the visible church (apparently members of the church) but who have departed from the truth and are, therefore, shown not to be believers at all. They are those who are false-Christians (pseudo-Christians). We have seen already that both Jude and Peter have a great deal to say about such, as well as Paul in his letters. The term “antichrist,” therefore, in particular, has to do with that which is placed over against the true Christ — a false gospel, a false doctrine, contrary to the truth. The antichrists arise in the church, not in the world, and they cause divisions, separations from the truth and they wreak havoc in the church itself. They were in the Old Testament as well, and the Scriptures have many examples of false prophets, false teachers, false priests, and false kings who were not truly God’s servants though they often were the leaders of Israel and often outnumbered the believers. Only the remnant were faithful and only they could rightly be called the children of God.

John has just assured his readers that he knows that they are true believers, but he now wants them to be aware that many in the church are not. Many who

have come out of true churches have themselves departed from the truth. We recall how many of these persons Paul notes in his writing both to the churches and to individuals. Even among Jesus’ apostles was a man of sin and among those who followed him in his earthly ministry were many who, in the end, turned from him so that evidently *only a handful* truly believed in Jesus (Acts 1:15).

John wants these readers to know that he does not place them among the antichrists, but at the same time he wants them to know that there exist many antichrists within the church (2:20-22). The antichrist is any one who denies that Jesus is the Christ (vs.22-23). Any doctrine, therefore, which does not accept the deity of Christ and the complete sufficiency of his work on our behalf is a false doctrine. First came the true gospel declared by Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry, and by his apostles since then. Then (as even Paul indicated), after the apostles came those bringing challenges to the truth, gospels that deviated from the truth and led men to trust more in themselves, less in the Lord.

To fight false doctrine, therefore, the believers must be able to discern it and must cling to the truth they were taught once and for all by the apostles (v.24). They must not be led astray by those in the church who depart from the apostles’ teaching (v.26). They need not go to such false teachers to learn, but have the Holy Spirit which Christ has sent into every believer. To study God’s Word, therefore, and to be taught by the Spirit as they study is the only teaching they need (v.27).

In anticipation of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, John urges these readers to be bold in the truth and to be assured of the identity of the true believers. They are those who bear fruits of righteousness in their lives (vs.28,29). Thus John is echoing here what Jesus had earlier taught, namely, that by their fruits you shall know them (Matt. 7:15-20).

3. Eternal life (life with the Father and the Son) is life shown in doing righteousness (3:1-24)

The closing words of chapter two lead properly into the subject matter of the third chapter. He had just

been speaking of the fruit of righteousness that is evident in every true believer. Now, he will expand on this.

He shows first of all that the privilege of being called the children of God shows to us the extent of the love of God (3:1-2). The significance of being God's children is not yet fully known to any man on earth. The world does not give any thought at all to our being the children of God. Such a concept is totally irrelevant to the world which shuts God out of life — or seeks to do so (Psalm 2:1-3).

We do know, however, that when the Lord returns to receive us to himself, at that time, we shall be perfected. Our sanctification will be completed. We will be like him (v.2). This ought to be enough to make every true believer desire to purify himself right now, so that he will be ready when the Lord comes, just as the bride eagerly awaits the bridegroom and prepares herself as much as she can for his arrival (v.3). The church is often referred to as the Bride of Christ, as we have seen already and shall yet see in Revelation.

John next points out that none who are Christ's and, therefore, the children of God having fellowship with the Father and the Son, live any longer in sin (3:4-9). He does not need to explain that by this he is not speaking of *committing* sins but of *living in* sin. John had already shown that if any believer tries to insist that he never sins, he is a liar (chapter one); here, John is insisting that believers do not live to sin, but to do righteousness. There is no sin in Christ, therefore, the sins of believers are covered by the righteousness of Christ. If one truly abides in Christ by faith, then he can never comfortably sin. Sin is no longer of his nature; but being born again, he has a new nature that wants to do God's will and wants to please God — that is the opposite of wanting to sin, which was the old nature crucified with Christ (3:4-6).

Remember that this was just what the Lord told the Israelites, His remnant, when He spoke through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. He taught through them that what was needed was a new nature, a new heart, one that desires to obey God and keep the Law, one

controlled by the Spirit of God through rebirth (Jeremiah 31:33-34; Ezek. 36:24-37).

No one who has not believed in Christ and who has not been reborn by the Spirit can keep from sinning. He can never do anything that can be called righteousness. But the child of God can and does do righteousness (works acceptable to God because they are accepted in the righteousness of Christ) (3:7-9). To live a life of sin without any righteousness is the nature of Satan's seed; Jesus came to end such works of Satan (v.8) (cf. Gen. 3:15) Thus, when John says that believers, begotten of God, cannot sin, he means that it is contrary to their nature to sin and that they do not live in sin (always sinning) but instead they do righteousness (show in their lives the fruits of righteousness) (v.9).

John here speaks of the children of God and the children of Satan, just as we have noted these two categories of men on earth from the beginning (Gen. 3; Psalm 1). Jesus also very clearly showed that there are just these two types of men on earth in the human race (John 8:42-44).

Indeed, John goes back to the first example of the spiritual division between men on earth: the example of Cain and Abel which we noted in the beginning of our studies of the Old Testament (I John 3:10-12). God's children always are capable, by God's help, of doing what is righteous in the eyes of God. The devil's children, never are able to do anything which is right in God's eyes (v.10). Cain did what all natural men do: evil; Abel did what all reborn men are capable of doing: righteousness (things pleasing to God and which God will accept as good works) (vs.11,12).

The particular work of righteousness which John dwells on here is love of the brethren (3:13-24). Time and again, John, both here and in the Gospel, returns to this chief mark of the believer: his love for the brethren. It is, after all, the first of the fruits of the Spirit and therefore, the first evidence of Christ living in the believer (Gal. 5:22, 23; I Cor. 13).

The readers are not to be perplexed by the fact that if they have love in their hearts, they are hated by the world (v.13). That hate in the unbelievers

(antichrists and all) is evidence of their being Satan's children. On the other hand, the love of believers for one another is a clear evidence of their being God's children (v.14).

The example of love from which all Christians are to learn is the love of Christ for us (v.16). We know that he loved us because he laid down his life for us. In response, we show our love by our willingness to lay down our lives for others. John is teaching what the word "love" really means in the Christian context, namely, that one shows love by *deeds done* for others, and not merely by *saying* that he loves another.

It is noteworthy that throughout Scripture, whenever God is said to have loved men, it is always accompanied by some action of God on behalf of men. John goes on to say here that we show our love (our willingness to lay down our lives for one another) by the deeds we do for one another. If we have ample supplies of this world's goods but withhold them from a brother who has need of them, then no matter how much we *claim* to love him, we do not in reality (v.17). Love is shown not by mere words (that is easy to say) but by deeds done (that is true love which demands our resources, our time and our effort) (v.18).

Love in truth, then, is love that shows that we are in the truth (3:19-24). One may love the brethren but still feel himself an undeserving sinner. He should not let his feeling of guilt overrule what is plainly taught in the Word of God; namely, that if he does love his brother, he is assured that he is in the truth. No one who is not in the truth can truly love his brother (love him and do good for him because of the love of Christ in his own heart) (vs.20,21).

No believer, therefore, no matter how acutely he feels his own sinfulness before the Lord, ought to shy away from coming to the Lord freely, at all times, as a privilege of the child of God. If the love for God and for others is in the heart of the believer, then he can be assured that he is God's child and therefore, he can have boldness to come to the Lord asking all that a child can ask of his Heavenly Father, freely and without shame (vs.20-23). Every believer knows that he is a believer because the evidence of the Holy Spirit

in him is seen in his doing God's will — keeping His commandments, loving his brethren (v.24).

4. *Eternal life (life with the Father and the Son) is life shown in loving others because God has first loved us (4:1-21)*

Because the concept of love may be taken by those who are not true believers and used by them in a different sense than Scripture intends, John is concerned next to define clearly just what the Scriptures mean by love, lest anyone suppose that he truly loves when in reality he does not. There were many in John's day who would teach a false doctrine and would claim to be teaching the truth because they claimed that they loved as God has commanded (4:1). But, one does not truly love as God requires His children to love who does not believe that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh (vs.2,3). John is here insisting on what he had taught from the beginning of his Gospel: that the God of the Old Testament revelation has come in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ and that he is our Saviour, and none other (see John 1). It is the same truth that Paul insisted upon when he taught that if men confess that Jesus is *the Lord* (the Old Testament God who revealed Himself to Israel through the prophets and who promised to be their Saviour) then he is saved. Not to believe that Jesus is God is to deny that one has been saved by the Lord — the only Saviour of men! (Rom. 10:9)

Therefore, if anyone comes claiming to be a true believer, saying that he loves others (even doing "good" deeds for others), but who is not of sound doctrine, such a person is really an antichrist. He is within the visible church but is a child of the devil, not of God (v.3).

It is quite possible that such people will be well-received by other false believers in the church and that the world may get into the church to such a degree that the church will accept them and not the true believers (4:4-6). But true believers must not be deceived. True believers are those so designated by God and not by men.

The next few verses (4:7-21) are among the most beautiful verses on love found anywhere. They

are certainly comparable to those written by Paul in I Corinthians 13.

John, in these verses, establishes that Christian love is motivated by the true love of God. Therefore, if one does not believe that Jesus is the Christ and that he laid down his life for us, then he cannot have true Christian love. It does matter to God what is in our hearts — what we believe. Thus, true love — the love God calls for in the life of the believer — comes only in those who are born again and who know God through faith (vs.7,8).

True love begins with what God did for us in Christ. Love which is not motivated by a realization of God's first having loved us is not Christian love at all but a fraudulent love (vs.9,10). Our love, to be acceptable to God, must always be motivated by the love of God for us, as shown in Christ (v.11). Therefore, a sound confession of faith is imperative if one is to claim to have loved as God desires us to love one another (vs.12-16).

Christian love is perfect in God's sight because it rests on the work of Christ and his righteousness (v.17). Furthermore, true love has no fear because it is grounded not on human effort but on the grace of God through Christ (v.18). We love because God first loved us — or we do not love at all! (v.19)

Love of the brethren, therefore, remains the greatest evidence of our loving God and believing in Him. It is not possible that one who "says" that he loves God can truly love God if indeed he does not love his brethren out of a heart of gratitude for God's having first loved him (vs.20-21).

5. Eternal life (life with the Father and the Son) is life shown as we love God by honoring His commands (5:1-12)

Since John had just been discussing the relationship between love of the brethren and love of God, he goes on now to develop the concept of the love of God further. Just as it can be said that we do not truly love God unless we love the brethren, so likewise, it can be said that we do not truly love the children of God unless we love God (5:1,2).

Love of God is shown as we keep (guard with respect and honor) His commandments (vs.3-5). We are not to draw back from saying this because, by faith, we *can* keep God's commandments. Our faith has overcome the world and the old nature of the world in us that would rebel against the Commandments of God. By faith then, we can become doers of the Word and not hearers only. And true believers do not find God's commandments grievous (v.3), but delight to do His will (Psalm 40:8).

John notes three testimonies or witnesses that we are indeed God's children: the Spirit, water, and blood (5:6-9). The first is the water (presumably referring to Christ's baptism). The second witness is the blood (Christ's own shed blood). The first two testimonies, which find their echo in the New Testament sacraments, then, are granted by the church which administers both baptism and the Lord's Supper.

But there is a third testimony which is still greater and more certain (vs.7¹-12). It is the testimony of the Spirit of God who dwells in every believer. Paul taught us that the Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:15,16). Paul also teaches us that we are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (Eph. 1:13,14). And John records for us many teachings of Jesus Christ on the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit in the believers (John 14:16ff., 16:7ff.).

The testimonies of the church, as to the believer's genuine faith, may be faulty, but the testimony of the Holy Spirit is certain. The Holy Spirit is in each and every believer and gives evidence that he is the child of God. It is the Holy Spirit, therefore, who gives to us the most certain testimony, and his testimony is that those who truly believe have eternal life. Every true believer has the Spirit, and the Spirit in every true believer is the certain indication that he has and is living in eternal life (vs.10-12).

¹ The King James Version reads, "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."

Conclusion:

John concludes with a great closing statement concerning the great privileges of eternal life, about which he has been speaking throughout the letter (5:13-21).

It has been John's desire in the letter to bring the readers to an assurance that they do indeed have eternal life (v.13). Knowing that one has eternal life is the door to free access to the Lord as His child (vs.14-15). Having such access to the Father enables the child of God to go there, in love of the brethren, not only on behalf of himself, but also on behalf of others. From God he can receive grace to deal with such a one who is a brother but who has sin in his life (5:16,17).

John is saying that when sin has been dealt with in our own lives (as shown in the opening chapter of this letter), then we can see clearly to help our brother in dealing with his sin — a perfect exercise of true brotherly love (cf. Matt. 7:1-5).

In discussing this mission of love, John wishes the readers to be clear that he is talking about helping a *brother* with his sins and not an unbeliever. Those who are not saved must first believe on Jesus before they can have the privilege of having their sins forgiven. Sin unto death is sin not repented of, sin without faith in Jesus Christ. that is, the sin of one who is not reconciled to God by Jesus Christ, There is no way to deal with such sins until one has repented of his sins and believed on Jesus Christ — that is most basic to the gospel. But, there is sin which can be forgiven, as John had shown at the first of his letter. It is the Christians duty and responsibility first to confess his own sins to the Lord, and to be assured of their forgiveness in the shed blood of Christ. Then, he can help his brother and pray on his behalf for his sins to be forgiven (vs.16-17). It would be wrong to by-pass conversion and seek forgiveness when one has never believed in the Lord. There is no forgiveness for him outside of faith in Christ.

What a great privilege it is to be a believer: a child of God! Those who are a believer have the privilege of no longer being enslaved to sin (v.18). But when they do sin, Satan cannot destroy them; they

belong to God and through confession of sins all of their sins are removed.

Moreover, true believers know that they are from God and that they are living in a world in the grip of the evil one (v.19). This means that they, with certainty, realize that they are lights in a darkened world and that it is their privilege to be Christ's witnesses.

Finally, they know that Christ has come and has given to them eternal life. In short, they know the gospel (v.20). They know that this knowledge has given to them the eternal life of which John has been speaking. Knowing this, they must not be deceived or allow others to be deceived, so far as they are able (v.21). There are many false gospels in the world and many antichrists, idols, and substitutes for the real truth. All believers must ever be alert to these idols, these fabrications of the thoughts of men, and expose them and avoid them themselves, teaching other men to turn from them to the truth.

The Development of Thought in John's First Epistle

John defines quite concisely for us many important concepts relating to eternal life and the gospel which he has been proclaiming. The purpose of this summary is to develop in an orderly way those concepts and the interrelationship of them to one another. We shall do this in an outline fashion as follows:

Eternal Life:

- I. From the Father — 1:2; 2:25
- II. To the Apostles — 1:2
- III. Is being *in Jesus Christ*, the true God — 5:20 We know we are in Christ:
 - A. As we walk as he walked — 2:5,6
 - B. As we confess that Jesus is the Christ — 4:15
 - C. As we have *his Spirit* — 4:13; 3:24
 1. The Spirit of God confesses that Jesus came in the flesh — 4:2
 2. He is called the Spirit of *truth* — 4:6
 - a) Truth means not to walk in darkness — 1:6
 - b) Truth is *fellowship with Christ* — 1:6
 - (1) Fellowship with Christ is fellowship with believers — 1:3
 - (2) Fellowship with Christ is fellowship with the Father and the Son — 1:3
 - (3) Fellowship with Christ is not fellowship with darkness — 1:6
 - (4) Fellowship with Christ is to walk in light — 1:7
 - (5) Fellowship with Christ is to have the blood of Christ cleanse us from all sins — 1:7
 - c) Truth is to say that we know Christ and to guard his *commandments* — 2:4
 - (1) His commandments have been given from the beginning — 2:7
 - (2) His command is *to believe* in the name of the Son, Christ — 3:23
 - (a) To believe in Christ is to *overcome the world* — 5:5
 - (i) To overcome the world is to be begotten of God — 5:4
 - (ii) To overcome the world is to have faith — 5:4
 - (iii) To overcome the world is to overcome the evil one — 2:13
 - (iv) To overcome the world is to overcome them (who have the spirit of the antichrist) — 4:4
 - (3) His command is to *love* one another — 3:23 — love is known in Christ's laying down his life for us — 3:6
 - (4) His command is to love God — 5:3
 - d) Truth is where there is no *lie* — 2:21
 - (1) The liar is one who denies that Jesus is the Christ — 2:22
 - (2) The liar is one who denies the Father — 2:22
 - (3) The liar is the *antichrist* — 2:22
 - (a) The antichrist comes from among believers, but is not of them (does not remain in their doctrine) — 2:18,19
 - (b) The antichrist is the spirit of error — 4:6
 - IV. Is passing from death to life — 3:14 — We know we have passed from death to life because we *love one another* — 3:14
 - A. We know we have loved God's children because we *love God* — 5:2
 - B. We know we have loved God's children because we *do God's commands* — 5:2 — God's children are those who *do righteousness* — 3:10
 1. To do righteousness is the act of those who are begotten from God — 2:29
 2. To do righteousness is to be righteous in Christ — 3:7
 3. To do righteousness is to be of God — 3:10

II JOHN:

Walking in the Truth

This letter is addressed to the elect lady and her children (v.1). It may be a particular Christian lady to whom the letter is addressed, but more likely it is to a church, the children of which are considered the children of the church. That church may be Ephesus, though it is not certain.

John mentions the word “truth” three times in the opening salutation which indicates for us that he is concerned for the readers to walk in the truth. In the main body of the letter, John calls for the readers to walk in the truth, recognizing that some already are doing so faithfully (v.4).

First, walking in the truth is *walking in love for one another* (vs.4,5). We have seen already in the first letter what great emphasis John put on love as the indication of the Christian’s faith. Love is shown to be the commandment (will of God) for His children. Therefore, since God’s Word is the truth and it requires that we love one another, to walk in love is to walk in the truth.

Second, walking in the truth is *to walk after God’s commandments* (v.6). This is not circular reasoning but rather points to the fact that one cannot truly love others if they are not first obedient to the Lord and concerned with the will of God. It is not possible to love others if we do not first love the Lord. As Jesus taught, if we love him, we will joyfully keep his commandments. There is no other way to show our love (John 14:15).

Finally, to walk in the truth is *to reject those who deny God’s truth* (vs.7-11). There are many in the church (a thing which John clearly established in the first letter) who do not truly believe in the gospel or in Jesus Christ. Therefore, to walk in the truth and to love the brethren requires that we not tolerate those who teach untruth or who deny the truth of the gospel. Such people are antichrists (offering a false alternative to the gospel); and as such, they greatly endanger the church and all in it, if they are tolerated (v.8). Believers, therefore, to walk consistently in the truth, must not receive into their homes (befriend) those who do not

honor the truth though they pretend to be faithful members of the church (vs.10,11). John is here clearly speaking of those who *claim* to be true believers but who *teach* what is *contrary to the gospel*. To identify with such people is to take part in their evil testimony. John is not speaking of our receiving people into our homes in order to witness to them, but is speaking of those who claim already to be members of Christ’s church but whose lives and teachings show that they are not. By John’s definition, they are the antichrists, offering a false gospel. Paul said very much the same thing to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

John concludes with an expressed hope to be able to come and see those to whom he is writing, indicating that at this time he was not in prison.

III JOHN:

Workers for the Truth

This letter is addressed to a certain Gaius whom John is certain does walk in the truth (vs.1-4). Whether he is a member of the church to whom the second letter was addressed we do not know, though there does seem to be some relationship between the subject matter of this letter and the former one.

Apparently, the church of which Gaius is a member has some in it who have taken John’s words in the second letter as a justification for being inhospitable to all strangers. At any rate, such a hostility has risen within the church of which Gaius is a member. Either way, John commends Gaius for his hospitality to strangers who have passed through the city and have been well received by Gaius in the name of Christ (vs.5-8).

But one, namely Diotrophes, has been inhospitable to those who have come in the truth and has even forbade others in the church to receive such who had gone forth for the sake of the Name (vs.7,10). There was great danger, then, that if he continued to do this, others would be influenced to be inhospitable as well and the truth would be greatly hindered.

Therefore, John writes this letter to Gaius encouraging him to continue to set a worthy example and to follow the example of men like Demetrius

(v.12). Again, John closes his letter with an expressed hope of shortly seeing Gaius (v.14).

What Additional Information is Helpful?

It is difficult to know anything about the background of these letters. Therefore, we shall not, at this point, add anything more.

What Did This Revelation Mean to God's People When Originally Given?

By John's time of writing these letters, it is apparent that there were already in existence many counterfeit gospels. Above all, the whole concept of eternal life had obviously been so perverted by the false teachings of some that men were in danger of losing the truth of the gospel altogether. Many who had made a good profession of faith were now wondering whether, indeed, they were saved or whether they had eternal life. The false gospels were threatening to take away from them the truth the apostles had taught and substituting false gospels which could not save or offer any real comfort to the hearers.

John wished his readers to know first of all that he knew whereof he spoke. He had known Jesus in the flesh and had come to know true fellowship with Jesus and with His Father. And for John, this was sufficient to show that he knew what he was talking about when he taught in the letter about eternal life.

Many of the false doctrines being spread abroad were apparently denying the assurance of forgiveness of sins committed after one had become a Christian. False teachers were saying that one must live a sinless life, meaning, that to be assured they were saved, they would have to live flawless lives. Such people, of course, redefined sin and were able to argue that they did not sin at all.

John, therefore, taught the readers that not only do all Christians sin but, indeed, to deny that one sins is to call God a liar and make the gospel of none effect. One could not therefore, claim justly to be a Christian and have fellowship with God if he was, in fact, covering up sins and claiming not to have sinned at all.

Furthermore, John wished them to see that the true believer does works of righteousness, works approved by God according to His Word. While believers will sin, they must not live in sin or justify sin in their lives. To do so is to show that one is not a child of God but of Satan. Especially to be noted in the believer is love of the brethren, but those who promulgate their false gospels are characterized by a failure to love one another.

John then takes love as the clearest measuring stick to discern who is and who is not a true believer. But John knows that many of those same false teachers claim to "love the brethren," so he proceeds to show that unless one affirms the sound doctrine of the gospel — as John and the others have taught it — he cannot really love others, because love is only possible in the heart of one who has known the love of God through Jesus Christ (through the sound doctrine of the gospel). One cannot truly love who has not truly believed the gospel which the apostles have preached.

Finally, John teaches that our assurance of eternal life rests not just in our baptism, not even when we receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper from the church, as important as those sacraments are; but the witness of the Holy Spirit to our spirits is the real ground and base of our assurance that we have eternal life — as the Spirit testifies to us through the Written Word of God.

By these means, then, the readers would know that they had eternal life and would be assured against all of the false teachings running rampant in the church at that time.

In the next two letters, John showed to the readers that to walk in the truth meant not only positively to obey God's commands but also to resist those who taught any different doctrine (much as Paul had taught the Galatians and much as Psalm one teaches). But at the same time, John cautioned against turning away those who came with the truth, as though none had the truth but the reader alone. There were many true believers and true teachers moving about and such should be recognized and received with love.

As an example, John showed that many who claim to be sinless in fact fail to show love to the brethren. Such people have no right, then, to say that they are sinless.

John also wanted his readers to know that to recognize error in the teaching of the false teachers in the church was not to be judgmental but showed that they did indeed have life in themselves. No doubt, some of the false teachers had been saying that these who opposed them were evil for finding evil in them. But John showed that a characteristic of true believers is their ability to discern the truth from lies. They must recognize that such teachings are not just different versions of the same gospel which he and other apostles had taught, but were counter-gospels to the truth and that those who promulgated them were counter-Christ or antichrists. To be able to discern error was then an indication that they had eternal life in them. They could tell the truth from falsehood.

What Significance is There for Us Today in This Scripture Lesson?

If there were counterfeit gospels before the First Century had closed, how much more today? Currently, lack of assurance is one of the great plagues in the church and has served to make the church dull and sluggish, without vitality and without confidence — unsure in a hostile world. Heresy runs all the way from those who claim that only their little band who cross every “t” and dot every “i” with them are saved to the pernicious doctrine of universalism which assures that none will be lost ultimately or that if any are saved, then all will be saved.

Many sects claim that their followers do not sin and then they proceed to define sin in accord with those things which they do not do. They insist that only those who agree with them have any place in God’s church. The church today needs to teach, in opposition to such false gospels, both the seriousness of sin in the lives of Christians and the assurance and need for confessing that sin, thus having it forgiven by the gracious Lord. How many things that are wrong with the church are

due to unconfessed sin harboring in the hearts of those who profess to know Christ!

One of the characteristics of those who claim by their gospels never to sin is the way they condemn and judge harshly those who do not agree with them. They show no love to those who question their false doctrines, and thus they indicate that they are not true believers themselves, since they do not love.

As John did, so we need today to emphasize the place of true love in the fellowship of the saints. How often strangers enter into churches and fail to receive any love from those among whom they worship! Sometimes they are not even noticed. Oh that no visiting stranger would go uninvited into our homes for an afternoon lunch or dinner.

At the same time, the church needs to know *true love* from false love. Liberals in the church for decades have been using the word “love” as indicative of their gospel. But at the same time they deny the authority of Scripture and question the doctrines taught there: the virgin birth of Christ, the deity of Christ, the resurrection of the body, and many more. John teaches us clearly that none who deny these things can truly love, because such a one has not known the love of Christ in his own life.

One of the favorite accusations of the liberal teachers of theology today has been that the conservatives (those who hold to the truth of God’s Word) do not love them, meaning, they will not accept them and their right to teach in the church. But it is the very characteristic of true believers that they will not tolerate false teaching in the church. To condone heretics and to tolerate them is to deny Christ and the truth of the gospel. Of course, the liberal can be “gracious” and allow the conservative to stay in the church — for him there is no absolute truth anyway — except that one must not be dogmatic (insisting on the rightness of his doctrine). But for God’s child reciprocally to receive the false teachers and befriend them as though their theological differences made no difference is to sell out the truth. *That fact* John was teaching and *that* we need to remember today.

Ultimately, because churches do err and often are controlled by those who do not believe the truth, the assurance of our eternal life and of the truth must come, not from the church's pronouncements, but from the testimony of the Spirit bearing witness in our hearts by the Word of God.

Meditation on and Application of the Word of God to Our Lives.

1. How concerned am I about false teachings within the church in the world? within the denomination to which I belong? within my own church? within the Sunday School class or Bible Study which I am attending? What do I do about it?
2. How have I dealt with sin in my own life? When I sin, do I tend to try to cover it up and hope that God will not notice: Am I only concerned that my fellow Christians not notice my sins?
3. When I am away from those who know me, what is my conduct? Do I live as consistently by the Word as when I am with other Christians? Do I confess sins done in secret or only when found out?
4. How do I treat those in the church who do not agree with me? Do I examine my own views by God's Word or simply condemn them?
5. How do I discern the truth? by following the majority or by studying God's Word?
6. Am I tolerant toward those who clearly teach what is contrary to Scripture? Do I seek to show them the truth? Do I call for discipline against them if they refuse to be corrected by the elders?
7. Are the elders in my church concerned for what is being taught in the Sunday School class? the Bible studies taught by the members throughout the week? How do they show this concern?
8. As a Bible-believer, what's my attitude toward those who, though clearly teaching false doctrines, are very "tolerant" of me. Do I reciprocate and show the same tolerance toward them? Is that good or bad?

9. Where does my assurance of salvation rest? in the church or in God's Word? Do I know of churches or denominations which teach assurance based on the authority of the church rather than on the authority of the Holy Spirit through His Word?