

Augustine opened his sermons on 1 John by saying,
“This book is very sweet to every healthy Christian heart that savors the bread of God,
and it should constantly be in the mind of God’s holy church.
But I choose it more particularly because what it specially commends to us is love.
The person who possesses the thing which he hears about in this epistle
must rejoice when he hears it.
His reading will be like oil to a flame.
For others, the epistle should be like flame set to firewood;
if it was not already burning, the touch of the word may kindle it.”

I have selected 1 John, in particular,
because of the contrast in style and content between 1 John
and Ezekiel and Book 3 of the Psalms.

It seemed to me that after several months of exile and judgment,
the epistle that sets forth *love* most clearly would be in order!

Commentators over the centuries have noted that 1 John is very unlike Paul’s epistles.
Paul likes to argue.

There is a logic in Paul’s argument that moves from the indicative:
the statement of what God has done in Jesus Christ –
to the imperative:
the command of what you are therefore to *do*.

Paul’s epistles usually start with who Christ is and what he has done,
before coming to a rather clear turning point, with a *therefore...*

John takes a different rhetorical tack:
he exhorts.

There are false teachers that have plagued the churches,
but John does not argue with them.
John exhorts the church to love and good deeds.

But this exhortation is not lacking in doctrine!
Rather, John constantly moves back and forth
between indicative and imperative
John assumes that you already know the doctrine,
and so he weaves the doctrine into his exhortation.

One thing to remember is that Paul was addressing relatively young churches,
and is often trying to persuade people to believe certain things
(think of the controversy with the Judaizers).

But John is addressing older churches.

He may have been writing from Ephesus 30 years after Paul was there.
Some people see these differences and assume that there were “Pauline” churches
and “Johannine” churches in Ephesus and the surrounding area.

But there is no reason for such a claim.

Differences in pastoral tone and theological emphasis
can easily exist in the same churches.

Now, I have been saying “John” –

but we should be clear that this letter is anonymous,
but was traditionally ascribed to John, the son of Zebedee.

It certainly resembles very closely the gospel of John –

but it is worth pointing out that even the gospel of John is anonymous.

If we are going to rely strictly on what the Word of God tells us,
then we do not know who the author was.

But the early church generally believed (though not unanimously)
that John, the son of Zebedee, the beloved disciple, was the author.

It seems clear that the unique aspects of both the gospel and the first epistle of John
are rooted in the apostle John’s teaching.

Context: the churches that John writes to

have recently experienced the secession of a group of false teachers
(they went out from us because they were not of us).

But John is not interested in debating with these teachers.

John’s point is not to engage in the controversy,
but to remind the church of the basics of the Christian life.

He draws on the “wisdom” tradition in Jewish thought
to exhort the church to walk in the way of Christ.

And he starts with the incarnation:

1. That Which Was From the Beginning Is That Which We Have Heard and Seen and Touched (v1-2)

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—

What was from the beginning?

What have we heard?

What have we seen with our eyes?

What have looked upon and touched with our hands?

Notice the “that which”?

If he's talking about Jesus,
then why doesn't he say "who"?

Shouldn't he say "He who was from the beginning?"

Why does he say "that which"?

The relative pronoun 'that which' in verse 1 is difficult
because it corresponds to no noun.

The relative pronoun 'that which' is a neuter pronoun.

The nouns in the sentence are not neuter:

"word" (v1) is masculine,

"life" (v2) is feminine.

It seems to me that the reason for the neuter pronoun is simple:

John is not thinking about just "Jesus" –
but about the *incarnation* of Jesus.

The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

It's not just the "who" that we have seen and touched.
It's also the *what*.

What we have heard is not just the voice of a man.
What we have seen and touched is nothing less than the great redemptive event
that God promised through the prophets.

We have seen something – we have touched something – we have heard something –
concerning the Word of Life.

There were many in the early church
who said that Christ only "appeared" to come in the flesh.
They received the name "Docetist" from the Greek word meaning "to seem" –
because they said that Christ only "seemed" to be a man.

John is emphasizing the historical reality of Jesus Christ.
What happens in history is important.
And the most important thing that has ever happened in history
is that God himself took on our flesh.

The Life of God has been joined to our humanity.

But then in verse 2 John turns his focus to that Life:

² *the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—*

Three themes are introduced here:

- 1) the theme of eternal life through Christ
- 2) the theme of the historical reality of Christ
- 3) the theme of eyewitness testimony to Christ

All of these themes will recur throughout the epistle –
but John introduces them here.

John tends to circle around themes –
but each time he repeats a theme he adds something to it.

You can see that in miniature in verse 2.

The life was made manifest –
there you have the *objective* statement of what happened.
But not only was the life made manifest,
but also we have seen it –
and not only have we seen it,
but we testify to it –
and we proclaim to you the eternal life...

Notice how the theme of “life” continues to expand:
the “word of life” in verse 1 is the life that was made manifest in verse 2,
and is proclaimed to us as the “eternal life” –

*which was with the Father
and was made manifest to us –*

In other words, the *life* that is proclaimed to us
is none other than the life that was in the beginning with the Father,
and now has been made manifest in the flesh in the incarnation.

But what *is* “life”?

As we went through book 3 of the Psalter (as well as Ezekiel)
we have had reason to explore what *death* is.

Death is often portrayed a realm.
Death is a state of existence under God’s wrath and curse.

And so it should not surprise us that *life* is often portrayed as a state of existence
under God’s blessing.

Life – in the scriptures – is characterized by blessing.

In the Garden in Eden God’s blessing was that Adam and Eve
would be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.
In Abraham, God’s blessing focused on land, seed,

and the promise that all nations would be blessed in Abraham's seed.

As we have seen in Ezekiel, *life* comes when God is *for* you –
death comes when God is *against* you!

We all live under the shadow of death,
but John proclaims to us a *life* which is eternal –
a blessedness which is forever!

And this life is a life lived in fellowship:

2. And that Which We Have Seen and Heard, We Now Proclaim (v3-4)

³ *that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.* ⁴ *And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.*

The reason why John proclaims this life to us
is so that we may have fellowship with him –
“and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

This fellowship – this *koinonia* – this communion –
is a communion of life, a fellowship of life.

If the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
then the life of God himself has been joined to humanity.

The incarnation has forever joined God and man.
There is now a true communion of life between God and man,
because of the incarnation of the Word.
What we have seen and heard – what *really happened* in history,
in the incarnation of Christ –
is what we now proclaim to you,

so that you too may have fellowship with us.

And this fellowship is not just a social club!
Yes, I'm glad that you do nice things for each other,
but everyone does nice things for their friends!
Yes, I hope that we spend time together,
but that's not really what fellowship is about.

Fellowship – *koinonia* – is a communion of life –
and Christian fellowship is a sharing of the life of God through Jesus Christ.

Fellowship (*koinonia*) – the life that is in Christ
is now ours in fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ –

and therefore we also have fellowship with one another.

Note particularly that this fellowship cannot possibly be conceived
in a purely individualistic manner.

It is a communion of life – a fellowship of life – that must be corporate.

This is rooted in Jesus statements throughout the Gospel of John
that the Father has given the Son to have life in himself –
and to give life to whom he will.

The life of the Father – the life of God himself –
is the life of the Son, which is now shared with Christ’s people.

Eternal life is not something that can be given in chunks:

“Here is your piece of eternal life and now it belongs to you!”

Rather, eternal life is the life of God himself –
the life of the Father, which is also in the Son,
which now comes to us through fellowship with the Father and the Son –
and therefore with one another.

John says that “we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

After all, our joy will be incomplete
insofar as the church is not adequately sharing
in the communion/fellowship of the Father and the Son.

And so John reminds them of the basic message of the gospel:

3. The Message: (v5-10)

a. God Is Light (v5)

⁵ *This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*

This is good old fashioned wisdom language.

Two ways: wisdom and folly – light and darkness – righteousness and wickedness

God is light,
and in him is no darkness at all.

Get this straight!

Because the fellowship that we have with God cannot exist in darkness.

b. Therefore We Must Walk in the Light as He Is in the Light (v6-7)

⁶ *If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.*

If God is light, and in him is no darkness at all,

then anything that is characterized by darkness cannot have fellowship with God.
So if you say that you have fellowship with God but walk in darkness,
then you are lying – and you are not *doing* the truth.

What does it mean to “do” the truth?

Simply put, it means to live in a manner that is consistent with the truth.
Sin is utterly and absolutely inconsistent with communion with God.
You cannot have communion with God while you walk in darkness.

Verse 7 shows us the reverse:

⁷*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

Again two ways – two paths:

either you walk in darkness or you walk in the light “as he is in the light.”

Notice that there is no wiggle room here!

There is no place for grey areas!

There is either darkness or there is light (as he is in the light).

You cannot walk in twilight – nor in dusk –
there is either light or darkness.

But also notice that “fellowship with him” in verse 6

is contrasted with “fellowship with one another” in verse 7.

In verse 6, we *claim* fellowship with God, but we are lying.

In verse 7, we *have* fellowship with one another –
which is also fellowship with God!

Do you see the result?

it is *not possible* to have communion with God
without also having communion with one another!

I am reminded of the monk who had a terrible temper,
and so he went out in the desert by himself to escape.

At first he found peace, alone and quiet.

But one day, he went to the stream for water,

and he climbed back up to his cell among the rocks;

but when he set down his water jug, it tipped over and he let out a yell!

Quickly he repented of his anger and climbed back down to the stream.

But when he set down the water jug again, it tipped over and spilled again!

Enraged, he took the water jug and smashed it against the rocks.

Realizing that he could not escape his temper by isolation from others,

he returned to his brothers...

You cannot have communion with God if you do not have communion with one another!
If you walk in darkness in your relationships with others,
then you do not walk in the light as he is in the light!

But look at verse 7 again:

⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

Does that sound like a strange way of saying it?

It sounds like it is saying that there are two results from walking in the light:

- 1) we have fellowship with one another
- and 2) the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.

Grammatically, that is *exactly* what this verse says.

And if you think about it, it is true:

if you walk in darkness, your sins will not be forgiven,
and you will not have fellowship with one another!

Walking in the light is essential for the forgiveness of sins!

Which is why verses 8-10 are so famous!

c. And We Must Speak Truth about Ourselves (v8-10)

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Verses 6-7 were all about walking.

Where you walk?

Do you walk in the light?

Or do you walk in the darkness?

Verses 8-10 are all about talking.

You may see that verses 8 and 10 look very similar.

It all has to do with the difference between English and Greek grammar.

In Greek they look very different!

In verse 8 the verb is “to have” (in the present tense)

so it says “if we say we do not have sin.”

But in verse 10 the verb is “to sin” (in the perfect tense)

so it says “if we say we have not sinned.”

So the point of each is quite different.

“If we say we do not have sin” –
in other words, if we say that sin is not something that we have –
or, sin is something that doesn’t affect us –
then we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If you say that you don’t have a problem with sin,
then you are self-deceived.

But

⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

The word “to confess” (homologeō) means to “say the same thing.”
It has often been said that in confession we *agree with God* about our sins.

But the point here goes back to our basic point about communion with God.
You cannot have communion with God if you walk in darkness.
You cannot have communion with God if you disagree with him about your state!

If you say “sin doesn’t affect me”!
Then you do not have communion with God.

What is more, verse 10 goes a step further.
Because verse 10 does not merely talk about “having” sin –
but about actually sinning:

¹⁰ *If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

This is the perfect tense – a completed action with ongoing consequences!
It is not just that we “have” sin –
but we *have* sinned!
And if we deny that we have sinned,
then not only have we deceived ourselves,
but we have also made *him* a liar,
and his word is not in us.

We’ll come back to this next week,
because John keeps circling round these themes –

but suffice it to say that if we confess our sins –
if we agree with what God has said about us,
then he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Do you recognize that language?

That's the language of Psalm 85, 86, 88 –
“steadfast love and faithfulness”
“justice and righteousness.”

When we confess our sins,

God is just to forgive us.

When we say the same thing about ourselves that God does,

he is faithful to his promise to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

How can a dark and gloomy people walk in the light as he is in the light?

Because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The one who shone in the beginning is the one who veiled his glory in our flesh,
so that our flesh might share in his glory!

When you walk in Christ, you walk in the light.

And if you feel like you keep flitting back and forth between light and darkness –

STOP IT!

Knock it off!

Confess your sins and walk in the light as he is in the light,

so that we might have communion with one another

and with the Father and the Son.