

Lesson 24 – “God is Light”

1 John 1:1-2:6

Dan Leppo

Hebrews 4:12 tells us the Word of God is alive and powerful. Supplementing the Scriptures with an understanding of who wrote the book or letter and when - as well as what the societal conditions were at the time of its writing can add important context that amplifies both the Word's power and its relevance to *our* time in history. While John never mentions his name in these three letters, or epistles, the first verse of our reading sounds very similar to the opening verse in his Gospel. There's little or no debate among Bible scholars as to John's authorship of this epistle.

However, there is debate over the order in which he wrote his contributions to the Bible. John's contributions were his Gospel, these three letters, and Revelation. Up until recently, many people thought this was the order in which he wrote these. However, several notable scholars have him writing Revelation *after* his Gospel and then these epistles. Some argue that 3 John was the last document written in the New Testament.

If this is the correct order of his writings, then that would put the date of these letters around 100 AD – about the same age as John. Why this is important is some 65-70 years after the beginning of the church there was a fulfillment of one of Jesus' warnings in Matthew 7:15, “*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.*”

Historians tell us that this false prophet teaching that was gaining steam at this time was something called Gnosticism. According to J. Vernon McGee, their principal teaching was matter of material (the body) was essentially evil; only the spirit was good. They considered the Incarnation (God being in human form) impossible since God could not unite Himself with anything evil such as a body. One lie behind this teaching was while these people could be, allegedly, super spiritual, they could live hedonistic lives because since there was nothing good about the body, they could abuse it without any consequences.

Pastor John knew the significant spiritual evil behind this teaching. If Jesus wasn't the Son of God – meaning He wasn't the unblemished Lamb that was required as an acceptable offering, then His sacrifice on the cross would *not* have been sufficient to pay the price for our sins. This is why the Lord's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection is so essential to our faith. Jesus' resurrection was God the Father's stamp of approval that His Son's sacrifice satisfied *all* of the requirements for forgiveness and reconciliation with believing humanity and its Creator. The Apostle Paul told us the consequences of this teaching in 1 Corinthians 15:14, “*And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.*” Consequently, the tone and structure of this first epistle, which is really more of a sermon than it is a letter, was both to rebuke this teaching and remind the people of the truth.

This epistle is broken out into three sections:

- The light of God in chapters 1 & 2
- The love of God in chapters 3 & 4
- The life of God in chapter 5

John also had four reasons for the reader to read this letter:

- That our joy may be full (1:4)
- That we not sin (2:1)
- The seduction of false teaching (2:26)
- That we believe in and have eternal life with Jesus (5:13)

As I mentioned earlier, there are clear similarities between this verse and the first verse in John's Gospel. First, he claims Jesus was there at the beginning of time. Genesis 1:1 starts with, "In the beginning, God..." Before the heavens and earth were created, God existed. The Hebrew word for God in Genesis 1:1 is *Elohim*. This word is critical to understand for two reasons:

1. It is being used as a descriptor of God as Creator.
2. It is a plural word. This does not mean there are multiple gods. What this means is there is more than one person that comprises God, or the Godhead. This is an immediate declaration and introduction to what we know to be the Holy Trinity – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit.

Why this is important is John is rebuking the Gnosticism teaching by declaring that Jesus, the Son of God – a co-equal member of the Holy Trinity, is the One that he along with the disciples (now apostles) *personally* knew. So, just as he began his Gospel, John begins with this epistle declaring not only that Jesus was and is God, but also John has seen, heard, and touched the Son of God. Given what we've learned about the evil behind Gnostic teaching, these personal testimonies of interaction with Jesus are direct rejections of this evil doctrine.

John uses the word "proclaim" in each of the first three verses of this epistle. The Greek word translated "proclaim" is *apangellomen*, which includes the idea of announcing or reporting. In today's times, we could title what he's saying as "Breaking News." The Breaking News John is reporting is Jesus was both God and man at the same time. Moreover, he was giving the Lord the title of Word of Life. Warren Wiersbe offers the reason why John gave Jesus this title, "*Because Christ is to us what our words are to others. Our words reveal to others what we think and feel. Christ reveals to us the heart and mind of God.*" The God of the Bible is a God of life. He created life, He saves life, He restores life, and He makes available eternal life. Satan, on the other hand, is all about death and destruction.

In verses 2 & 3, John's Breaking News continues to unfold with the news that Jesus is eternal life. He is the answer to the question, 'What is eternal life?' John hammers home Jesus was with the Father, and He had personally appeared to him and his fellow disciples. He didn't just appear to them - He lived with them for three years. In verse 3, John introduces something that is unique to the Christian faith – fellowship. The Greek word used here is *koinanea* – it implies an

intimacy of relationship. This fellowship we have with each other is centered around the things of the Kingdom of God.

The greater Breaking News is such faith allows you to enter into fellowship with God the Father and God the Son. You may wonder why the Holy Spirit isn't included here. While being the more mystical member of the Holy Trinity, I've come to have a deep love and respect for Him. Please forgive the simplicity of how I'm about to describe Him, but He's like the ultimate behind-the-scenes person. These types of people are the ones making what's happening on the stage go as planned. You won't find one word in Scripture where the Spirit glorifies Himself. Yet, He is no less God and no less powerful than the Father or the Son. However, He's quite content dwelling within each of us, convicting us of our sins, applying the truths of Scripture to our hearts and minds, communing with us, and helping us in our walks and sanctification process. I would argue that most Christians do not understand, or appreciate, the uniqueness of our faith. It is a relationship of fellowship. God loves spending time with us, listening to us, and sharing His love and wisdom, and empowering us to glorify Him through the exercising of the gifts He's given to us. This is the most glorious component of faith in Christ because this is our original design – to glorify God and be in fellowship with Him.

1 John 1:4 tells us, *"We write this to make our joy complete."* As I noted earlier, this is the first of four reasons John wrote this letter – that our joy may be complete. Joy is not happiness. Happiness is the fruit of the flesh and, therefore, is temporal based on how we feel. Joy, on the other hand is a fruit of the Spirit – it's the second on the list of fruits of the Spirit, after love, provided in Galatians 5:22-23. Jon Courson said regarding joy, *"None of these things (our painful circumstances) need rob us of our joy because we know there's a much bigger picture."*

Verse 5 says, *"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."* The physical juxtaposition of this verse is clear – light vs. darkness. However, the deeper meaning behind this comparison is light is symbolic of purity or holiness vs. dark, which is symbolic of evil. I mentioned in my last lecture that there are multiple references in Scripture to God being holy. Sadly, and no doubt led by the enemy's influence on pastors of seeker friendly churches, the teaching of God's holiness has been watered down, if not completely eliminated. If there is an emphasis on God's holiness, then the depth of the lostness of our sinful condition becomes more evident and obvious. I can understand this is not the kind of teaching that is going to pack them into their huge and debt-burdened churches.

However, what I don't understand is by not emphasizing the magnitude of God's holiness, they are, by definition, *lessening* the power of God's grace and forgiveness. If you've been thrown into a five-foot hole, the depth of your gratitude of being helped out of the hole would be pretty modest. On the other hand, if you were stuck in a 100-foot hole, wouldn't the level of your gratitude be much greater for a life-saving rescue? The quality of our faith and level of appreciation for our salvation is equal to our understanding of the depth of our depravity and how far a holy God went to in order to rescue us. Put this as a backdrop and now think about the power of God's love behind Romans 5:8, *"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

Verse 6 says, *"If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth."* A person who claims he/she is walking with the Lord should not

be an Eeyore - or a sad sack. Verse 5 just told us there is no darkness in the Lord. There's nothing negative about Him. He's not mean. He is a God of hope (Romans 15:13); a God of goodness (Ps. 107:1), and a God of love (1 John 4:8). If we find ourselves moping around and saying, "Woe is me," then how can we claim we're in close fellowship with a God who is none of that??

Jesus said earlier in this Gospel He is the Door. Speaking as the King of the Kingdom of God, the Door He is referring to is the entryway into His Kingdom. The key to the Door – to Him providing you entry – is to own your sinful condition and confess your need for His forgiveness for your sins. Verse 8 warns us that if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 3:23 that we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The key word in this verse is "*all*." With the lone exception of Jesus Christ, every human being has sinned. Therefore, if any of us claims to be without sin, we are not only denying the truth of God's Word, but also we are then denying the need for a Savior – the need for Jesus.

Look, I get it – it is not fun owning our sinfulness. It's embarrassing, shameful, condemning, and all the other soul-crushing junk that comes with sin. Do you recall when I said earlier about the folly of not teaching about God being holy? What was the folly? By not teaching the truth of God's holiness, we can't have an appreciation of the depth of His love that He has for us to go through what He did to rescue and save us from our lostness. Consequently, the denying of the need for Jesus is denying access to the Door to His Kingdom. Who do you think is behind the denial of this truth? Our old nemesis, Satan.

I don't think it is an accident that John *immediately* followed up the warning of deceiving ourselves and the truth of our sinfulness not being in us in verse 8 with the glorious promise of the truth in Verse 9, "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" I want to present one caution to this verse. Legalists might take this liberating verse and hang a ball and chain on it by interpreting it that if you don't confess every sin all the time, you won't be forgiven of them. In essence, they are making an addition to Jesus' saving work on the cross. Anytime you hear believe in Jesus plus....., you are being lied to. Remember what I belabored over and over again the last time I was up here? What did Jesus say at the cross? It is finished. There's nothing more for you to be saved other than to believe in Jesus.

I'm not saying that the periodic confessing of sin isn't a good thing – it is. However, if you have owned your sinfulness to Jesus, you are good with the Lord. What confessing your sin does is it puts it out in the open for you to own it, and it allows the Holy Spirit to go to work in helping you realize it's been forgiven - and you can be free from it. It is *not* though, a requirement for you to maintain your salvation. That was signed, sealed, and delivered at the cross. I can't speak for any of you, but after I became a Christian and confessed my sinfulness to Jesus, He has unveiled other sins I did not really understand were sins at the time of my confession. Not confessing these newfound sins had *no bearing* on my salvation. What the eventual confessing of these sins did do is it improved the quality of my relationship with God. By coming to the truth of my deeper fallen condition as a sinner, I gained a corresponding deeper appreciation of how much God must love me to have sent His Son to save me.

One last comment on the confession of sin. You often here the term “brokenness” in Christian circles. A Christian needs to be broken if they’re going to let the Great Potter put us back together the way He originally designed us. There is truth in this visual. However, my caution for you is to self-inspect the cause of your brokenness. Is your brokenness coming from an ownership of your sinful condition? Or is your brokenness the damage you have as a result of painful childhood experiences and memories? There is a difference. Many of these childhood experiences are not our sins, but sins committed against us. When it comes to our relationship with God, He is most interested in the level of ownership we are taking for *our own* sinful condition. Please don’t take my comments as God isn’t interested in healing you of your childhood experiences that came from others – He loves you too much to ignore those. However, confession of our sinfulness is what will open the door to a deeper understanding, revelation, and appreciation for the freedom we have in God’s forgiveness, and the power to live without the temptation and bondage from that sin.

Moving into Chapter 2, we get to the second reason for John writing this letter in verse 1, “*My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.*” We have the full display of the mindset of Christ in John in this verse. Four times in Leviticus, we heard God exhort us to be holy because He is holy. As a Christian, one of our primary life’s objectives is to live a holy life. However, our sin nature makes this objective impossible to be perfectly adhered to. John does his pastoral duty to remind all of us that when we do sin, we have an advocate with God the Father – His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Don’t let Satan hold you down with his shame and condemnation tactics. Yes, you should feel remorse for your sin, but the greater feeling – that joy that we talked about earlier, is when Satan is accusing you, Jesus is saying to His Father, “*This one’s mine, I’ve forgiven him/her.*” Which voice do you think the Father is going to listen to – Satan’s or His only begotten Son’s????

The last 4 verses of our reading have a title above it, “*Love and Hatred for Fellow Believers.*” I would like to share some insight God has pointed out to me regarding one of my more often-than-I-like-to-admit-struggles – that of judgmentalism or having a critical spirit. For those of us who get caught up in a moment or repeated habits of criticizing or judging a fellow brother or sister in Christ, please allow me to present you a scene of what we are really doing. 1 John 2:1 tells us that we have an advocate with the Father. What is the role of an advocate? Simplistically, an advocate is someone who is on *our* side. Situationally, imagine you are in a courtroom, and you are being accused of something. Legally, you can defend yourself in court, but there is a wise saying about people who choose to do this, “*The person who is his/her own lawyer has a fool for a client.*” If you opt to not be a fool, then you need someone to plead your case, or defend you against the accusation against you. If you can’t afford someone, the court will provide you a public defender.

In the spiritual world, according to Zechariah 3:1 and Revelation 12:10, your accuser is Satan. He is a powerful foe – and a sinister one, too. More often than not, the reason he’s accusing you is because he’s the one that tempted you into doing the thing to which he’s accusing you! Praise the Lord, we have a far more powerful spiritual defender, or advocate, in Jesus Christ. We can’t afford Him, but thank God by His grace, He is free.

While Satan can legitimately accuse us of our sins because they're real, his conclusions that these sins change our identity in Christ are false. He kicks us when we're down and tells us things like God is mad at us and doesn't love us any longer; or we're not really saved because we sinned; or we're not worthy to be God's child. I don't know about any of you, but I've heard these accusations more often than I'd like to admit. Listen to His words that refresh us with the truth of our identity as a believer in, and follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, our advocate.

1 John 3:1a: "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!"

Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

From John 10:28, listen to this fundamental truth from your advocate regarding the permanency of your identity in Him, "*And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.*" One last thing to impart to you when you are feeling the weight of Satan's accusations; they may be factual, but they are *not* the complete story or truth. In the eyes of the judge (conveniently the same Being as our advocate), He sees our sins washed white as snow by His Son's blood. Praise the Lord – *the truth of our sinful acts may be indisputable, but they are forgiven by the one whose love for us is immutable.*

Now getting back to those times when we are finding ourselves being critical or judgmental of a brother or sister in Christ. When we are being critical or judgmental of someone, are we not, in reality, accusing them? If that is true, and it is, then who are we acting like in this courtroom scenario I've just described? I would expect that question stung, because I know it did me when I thought about this and wrote it. But it gets worse, if we're doing the accusing, who are we going up against in the courtroom? The very One who, evidenced by the scars on His hands, saved *us* and is our advocate!!

If I stopped here on this point, then I would be just as guilty being critical and judgmental. This is where Satan stops, but it is where Jesus begins. Criticism, judgment, and accusations look for punishment, shame, and guilt. The result is condemnation. Mercy, compassion, grace, and forgiveness provide a far better and more liberating result – a love that frees. Faith in our advocate, Jesus Christ, whose love surpasses all understanding, sets us free from our propensity to criticize and judge. Moreover, by His Spirit, He provides a new and better life-path to offer the undeserved mercy and grace we received to those who we once were criticizing and judging.

Let's face it, brothers and sisters, each of us can be pretty unlovable at times. Again, we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In our heart of hearts, we know this. However, when we receive mercy and grace as opposed to the anticipated condemnation, we are not only stunned by such compassion, but also we become willing to offer it to others. This is the kind of witnessing that will change the world. Let us always remember 1 Peter 4:8, "*And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins.'*"

I would be not doing my job as a teacher if I didn't touch on the underlying message in verses 3-6. It's the dreaded "O" word – obedience. Verse 5 promises that if we are keeping His commands, then love for God is truly made complete in us. Notice the connection, or link, in this verse – "keeping His commands" and "the love of God." What this link is not saying is only if we keep His commands will we receive God's love. Do you remember what Jesus said after He consolidated the 10 commandments into 2 in Matthew 22:37-39? *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* Again, notice the link of keeping the commandments and love.

When we seek to live a holy life out of our love and gratitude for what Jesus did for us on the cross, we become a living testimony to God's love. This is what separates us from the rest of the world. In the backdrop of a sin-ravaged and darkened world, the merciful, gracious, and forgiving love we offer to those God brings into our lives shines a light – a beacon on a hill. Keeping God's commandments isn't a chore or a list of dos and don'ts. He gave them to us out of a love for us – knowing that if we lived like this, we would be free from temptation and free to love Him and to love others. John promises us that if we live like this, our joy may be full, and that we not sin – or nearly as not as much as we do.

I want to conclude with a realization that God has impressed upon me as I grow older. We make life more complicated than it needs to be. Especially us Christians who go down academic rabbit trails about certain Scriptures. If only our zeal to find every answer, which we won't always find or get, was matched by a zeal to love God and one another. For those of you who are in hard place at the moment – be it your health, a troubled relationship, or a financial hardship, please forgive me if I have dismissed or diminished your suffering with my comment that we make life more complicated than it needs to be. My heart breaks for your suffering. Far more importantly, so does God's. As we approach Resurrection Sunday – the centerpiece of the Christian's hope, my prayer for each of you who are suffering is that you hold onto the promise and the pure simplicity that you are the joy that was set before Him when He went to the cross. When you choose to rely on the truth of God's word, He will lift your spirit above your painful circumstances and the complications we make out of life and remind you of the love He has for you – that your joy may be full. God is so very good – all the time. If you can't see it or feel it now, remember the cross. But He's not on it anymore. He's alive. He loves you. Love conquers all. It's really that simple – the rest is, from an eternal perspective, just noise to distract us from the simple truth that God loves you. Amen?