

A Short Commentary on the Epistle of 1 John

by Brian Coatney

While camping at Hungry Mother State Park for three days this summer with our son Carson, his wife Mindy, and the three boys (Caleb 8, Henry 7, and Wesley 5), we were at the beautiful park beach close to our campsite. Tandy and I watched them all sun and swim, and as we sat there, I began to have the sense that I was to write a series of blogs on 1 John. I've compiled them here. Thanks as always to my wife Tandy for editing and to my dear friend of 32 years, Sylvia Pearce, for hosting my works on her web site, theliberatingsecret.org.

1 John is a challenging epistle; I have always thought that, and it baffled me for years until in 1994 I began to see that much of what had baffled me in scripture was its simplicity, which I tried to make overly complicated. This doesn't mean that John's epistle isn't deep; it's profoundly deep, but simple as well when approaching it with a focus of unity. John sees things as either/or, and this is far too plain and direct for the kind of analysis that turns straight highways into mazes. This John does not do.

This study blessed and enriched me, and I believe it will do the same for you, and may you also write a series on John's letter to share with others.

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1 John Chapter 1

1 John is a good epistle for our age – an age that tolerates what it shouldn't tolerate and refuses to tolerate what it should. Truly, the world only continues to avoid self destruction because of the love of God in Jesus Christ. John writes this letter with gentle but clear forcefulness to help a Christian in any age swayed by forms of Christianity that in essence are only the wolves masquerading as the sheep. His letter does not need to incite fear in anyone who stays with the plain, simple teachings about who Jesus Christ really is and what He did to save us.

The first thing John does is to tell us that he was among those who heard, saw, and touched “the word of life.” By this, he clearly means that the eternal Logos and life manifested as the person Jesus Christ that he walked with as a disciple on the earth. It is almost sacrilege to go on too much about this since John's brevity is intended to sink in quickly and confirm the full humanity of the Father's Son. Nothing purely ethereal is in view here, just simply the same truth that John wrote in his Gospel when he said, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” He doesn't explain how it happened; he says it happened, and he was there when it did.

Further, he does not write this to boast, as if one needs to have lived in the first century with Jesus. As an affirmation, he writes this, commending himself as a reliable historical witness to the facts that all believers through the millennia can find joy in and know in Spirit truth. John describes himself as a reporter when he says, “this is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you.” As such, he is saying that the front page news of the *New Jerusalem Gazette* is fully verifiable by the paper's reporters, and the archives of the Gazette will never be found in error.

Also, John's tone is not an ominous one, though definite in warning, for he is purposing to give comfort and joy to those who began in the truth but find themselves the targets of subtle error that attempts to take the Christ they started with and make that Christ into a ghostly, nonhuman something or someone who mixes good and evil in the same pot and fails to divide them from each other. In a philosophical sense, good and evil would not seem attractive as identical, but sin's enticement brings a deceiving wave attempting to justify the works of the darkness. How ironic that the enemy denies righteousness made manifest in the flesh in Christ, but eagerly commends darkness in the flesh. John calls this a lie.

To know God, John says, is to walk in the light as “He is in the light.” John presupposes here that his readers know the difference between darkness and light, and that only deception can entice one to confuse the two. Jesus said the same thing: “Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit” (Matt. 7:16-17 RSV). In reading Jesus' words again, it rings obvious that it's hard to miss thorns and thistles when looking at a tree. Only insane, false fantasy starts to imagine them as fruit. How can one start to miss the obvious?

Now it's also true that readers of 1 John can overly react in a legalistic way to what he writes here. Suddenly, the sin conscious Christian introspects again and sees the self as unclean and sin as ubiquitous in the Christian, as if a Christian is made up of darkness and light warring against each other as the very fabric of the believer. This is not John's message or intent, for he plainly makes it simple to walk in the light; his issue is not one of making righteousness difficult for the Christian to walk in. To the contrary, he sees walking in the light as simple. After all, walking in the light of the sun in our solar system is easy and spontaneous for us, so how much more then the light of God shining brightly upon us in the Gospel.

This sin consciousness still had a hold in me in my ignorance when I went to seminary in 1976-77, though I did not know I had it or what it even was. What I did know was a measuring stick—really still the lie of independent self in me—that filtered John's words in a way he did not mean them. I noticed also that when the floor was opened to questions from professors, other students often asked about 1 John 1:9, and it seemed curious to me that this verse came up so often.

Why did we students ask about it? We asked because no matter how many times we confessed sin, the sin consciousness, that we didn't even realize we still had, never went away, and so no matter how much we confessed, no relief came. Part of that came from confessing what is really temptation, or what are merely thoughts and feelings in the soul/body realm that the undiscerning believer takes as occasion to think, "This is who I am."

John is talking about sin in two ways. First and foremost, it is sin not to accept who Jesus Christ really is, the word made flesh who died to atone for our sins. Second, John is talking about sins actually committed, not temptations, thoughts, or feelings that have not conceived, as James puts it in his letter. Walking in the light causes us to let any sins present go ahead and come to the surface where they may be called what they are and confessed.

Confession does not cause forgiveness; it opens us up to the forgiveness already there in the blood of Jesus, which God is "faithful and just" to see as our cleansing. Faith agrees with God and rejoices to go its way, knowing that forgiveness is the eternal constant in Christ and not based on groveling on our part, lamenting in, "Oh, how could I have done that?" as if there is an independent self that can overcome temptation to sin.

John is not saying, however, that a Christian has to sin; he is saying that we *have* all indeed and not to acknowledge that is to flatly deny why Jesus Christ, God's Son, had to die on a Cross for us. All have sinned, and all can sin. The only forgiveness for sin is in the blood of Jesus Christ, and the only preventative from continuing in sin is abiding in Christ, which John gets to in the next section of his letter.

In summary, John has told us thus far that the God's Son, Jesus Christ, was made manifest, and that he heard, saw, and touched Jesus, and that as a reporter, John tells us

this to bring joy and confirmation in us, and fellowship with God and each other. Further, “God is light and in Him is no darkness,” meaning that no evil resides in God. Therefore, it is deception to combine darkness and light as if they are the same. They are not, and those who walk in darkness but call it light, are telling a lie. As a comfort to believers, we are confirmed in the truth that confession of sin brings us immediate faith that God is faithful and just to see us as cleansed by the blood of His Son. We do not need to linger as if that isn’t true, and we do not need to add anything to what Jesus did. Last, we have all sinned and need Jesus Christ as our savior. Failure to acknowledge that is the sin of sins and calls God a liar.

In 1 John 2, John proceeds to how it is that “you may not sin.” Stay tuned for this exciting continuation in John’s marvelous letter.

1 John 2:1-11

John transitions from the fact that all have sinned to addressing, “My little children.” The personal pronoun adds a tone of affection and connection that otherwise would leave the address more detached and not as fatherly, and John is definitely fatherly. He is not addressing fathers and young men at the moment but little children, meaning those who know that their sins have been forgiven but don’t know that they no longer have to give in to sin.

But before getting to that, John affirms that Jesus Christ is our advocate with the Father when sin occurs. The one who sinned does not do anything other than rest in the fact that the advocate always assures forgiveness based on what He did at the Cross, not on any need for compensatory actions by the one who sinned.

Now John gets to the subject of avoiding sin. In the mind of a little child, sin looks too big and persistent to resist, and flesh looks all too weak and unable to hold out against the constant drip of temptation. True, flesh cannot, but advancement to the young man stage means rising up in faith to overcome the evil one by what John calls the “anointing” and the fact that “the word of God abides in you.” Anointing means the Spirit of God, and the word of God is of course the living word, not a code that one tries to humanly obey.

Clearly here the idea is union with God through Christ, and John says that to know this is to know Him. My mother-in-law, Mimi always said that knowing carries the idea of conjugal union—to be “mixed with” as she put it. Two become one, and the one receiving becomes the manifestation of the one transmitting.

If this does not happen, one would ask, “How can two be one, and how can one be mixed with another and not manifest that other?” What if a student studies medicine, is mixed with it, and claims to know it but can’t treat the simplest of illnesses? That would make no sense. As my old mentor Norman Grubb said, “What you take, takes you.” Thus to take the anointing of God and the word abiding in you means that you cannot help but

manifest the life of God, which is light and love, with darkness passing away, and day ever more shining.

Deceivers, however, introduce false ideas of grace and teach that since we are not under the law, therefore, there is no law. John later says, “sin is lawlessness” (3:4 RSV), but here John uses the terms commandments and those who “keep His word.” This is John’s equivalent of what Paul says in Romans 7 where Paul affirms that the law is holy and good, and that it is an error to minimize it or throw it out. That is a false way of dealing with sin. The true way is to let the law be all that it is and let efforts to keep it prove vain so that the seeker realizes the need for deliverance from another, namely Jesus Christ living in us by His Spirit—the anointing as John calls it.

Only in this way does one gain assurance of knowing Him. Think about it: why would flesh level living and lies bring assurance? That would make no sense. This does not mean that a Christian who is caught in sin cannot know at the same time that God is still his father and Jesus his savior. John’s point is that sin keeps one from knowing God in the way that young men and fathers do, which is to say in the sense of abiding as a way of life where one walks in the keeping power of God and not in the power of sin.

John knows that little children sin, just like parents know that their children disobey. However, the goal is, “like parent, like child,” and so as the anointing takes hold in a little child of God, sins drop away. Not only that, the notion that one must keep sinning drops away. I find it incongruous how a Christian can expect victory in certain sins and not other sins. Equally incongruous is the idea that we must all sin daily and that a dark cloud of sin, like gnats, always lies under the surface, making us unable to really live free from sin. If Jesus can keep me from one sin, he can keep me from any sin and all sins. Yes, sin is possible, but becomes less likely as abiding becomes the preferred and easy state in the keeping of God.

At this point, John’s discussion gets interesting because he assures them that he is not writing a new commandment. Why would he need to say that? Several reasons come to mind. First, the Gospel never changes and never needs updating. Culture changes and progresses, and such is good, but the mindset that gets too sophisticated for the everlasting Gospel has gotten too uppity.

Next, when a little child begins to see the inflexibility of God’s commandments and the hopelessness of self keeping them, this can lead to the cry, “Is there a new commandment out there?” Nope, there’s not. However, there is the good news of the anointing and the word of God abiding within. No one will seek those if “new” commandments are offered in the hope that flesh will find a way to muscle through to acceptable keeping of them.

Last, John gets to the core, which is love. Later he will say, “God is love,” not God has love, or God gives love. God is love, and love is self for others. Hatred is the opposite of that, and only by abiding in God can we love. John does not mean that we are not tempted by hateful feelings; he means by hatred the manifestation of the evil one in a

person's intent. Intent is everything. We know our intent by knowing the One who lives in us and abiding in His intent. As a little child starts to see that, "the darkness is already passing away."

Next time, the lesson will get into little children, young men, and fathers. Stay tuned.

1 John 2:12-17

So far John has told us that everyone has sinned and needs a savior, that it is darkness to mix light and darkness, and that it is wrong to weaken God's commands to accommodate flesh level living. Now he addresses children, fathers, and young men. The sequence looks out of order, but the idea is not chronological. Children are naturally coupled with parents, and young men have gone out from the constant shelter of home base to learn how to handle life without constant supervision, thus the order that John employs in naming the three.

Also odd at first is the repetition of addressing them, yet the first mention establishes where each is, and the second adds an experiential aspect. For example, John tells the little children, "your sins are forgiven," but in his second address, he calls them children instead of little children and says, "you know the Father." This is because the children have grown a little, and in driving their stake of faith that God is indeed true and faithful to forgive, they have come to know the Father, even though they have not gone out yet like the young men to endure testing. Nonetheless, they now sense the nature of God and have entered into a warm trust of His love and constancy in not casting them off because of sins; and they know that His delight is in them as children and that they are truly His beloved family of children.

With the fathers, the address is the same each time: "you know Him who is from the beginning." This does not change, yet it does not mean lack of growth in knowing. Knowing a person is not static, but also, it does not go from knowing to something that exceeds knowing. Rather, knowing deepens and discovers constant new enrichment and wonders of eternity. The Cross is always the same Cross, the Godhead is ever constant, but the fascination with God never fades. Old truths never get eradicated, but they grow in detail and fullness. Also, think of the role of fathers; they help raise children, give guidance to young men, fellowship with other fathers, and continually enjoy the knowing of all these as encompassed within the overall knowing of God's nature and ways.

The address to the young men states at first simply, "you have overcome the evil one." This looks sparse, but John means it not to be sparse but a single statement that one says yes or no to. When hearing a direct statement like this, one either says yes or no. One might argue, "But it takes a process of overcoming; failures occur along the way." I think John is doing two things here by forcing the issue with such a simple, direct affirmation. First, he knows that only by faith does experience come. If a person plans for failure, failure will never drop away. If a person does experience failures and then gives up on the statement, "you have overcome the evil one," that person will then water down the

statement until finally he or she does not believe it at all. Faith must go against appearances and keep saying what does not look or feel true, though not calling darkness light or light darkness.

Next, I think John in his second mention of the young men acknowledges their growth: he says, “you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.” How are they strong? They obviously are strong because of discovering that only God is strong, and by abiding in Him, they are then strong. This is implicit in John’s statement that the word of God abides in them. They have taken His word, and it has now taken them. Not only have they hung on to the faith that as young men, they have overcome the evil one, they have learned the secret of the keeping whereby the One they took has taken them and keeps them safe from the evil one. Though the enemy always attacks, the enemy cannot gain power in their members while they abide, and abiding is now their way of life.

These young men started by hearing the word of God through the fathers who taught them. This was right and good, and fellowship will continue. However, fathers hear for themselves from God. Even when taught by others, fathers still are hearing directly from God and do not proceed in anything without that. When young men launch out, they are at first more dependent upon the words from their fathers than the inner word of God to them. Maturation occurs as the young man gets solidified in knowing God for himself. Now God is first, and fathers a distant second, yet with more reverence and respect than ever since those fathers pointed the way to the Father, and God still often addresses His sons through other sons. But the young men now are well on their way to being fathers themselves.

What a joyful section of John’s letter this is. Next time, the lesson will look into what John says about keeping what one has when danger threatens.

1 John 2:18-28

John speaks here to his children, both striplings and mature; for even those grown into fathers in the faith may be John’s children in the faith. He speaks a heavy word now, saying “it is the last hour,” a phrase saying that no other hour is coming; this is it. The point isn’t whether Christianity has stretched out over 2000 years since Christ, which seems a ridiculously long hour; the point is that when history has reached its last hour, no later hour is coming.

Not surprisingly, the readers knew of the prophecy of history’s ultimate villain and blasphemer – the antichrist, and John doesn’t stop here to talk about that but instead tells us “many antichrists have come.” The proliferation of antichrists is John’s evidence of the last hour. As believers have multiplied, so have the antichrists, making a demarcation between those who believe that Jesus Christ is God’s only solution and those who think that Jesus Christ is just one of God’s solutions.

Surely we see this in the 21st century after significant erosion of truth in many churches over time leading up to 2011, and so we could expect history to have a trail of the same demarcation over and over again wherever the Gospel has taken hold. Paul told the Ephesians the wolves would come in, and they always do wherever faith and fellowship in Christ is pure. Someone will up and say, “Jesus was a good man, but there are other ways to God.” The attack on Christ doesn’t come only by frontal denial of Christ but also by affirmation of so called other ways of salvation.

Doesn’t it sound exclusive and judgmental to say that Jesus Christ is the only way to have sins forgiven and live a righteous life? After all, look at all the humanitarians and sincere people who don’t believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. How can one call them unrighteous? Here it’s important to judge the fruits by the source, for if the source is not Christ, then ultimately, rebellion against God will be found as the underpinning of such love and benevolence as the antichrists seem to manifest.

John says the test is sustained fellowship among those who preach Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father: “No one who denies the Son has the Father.” This will be unpalatable after a while to those who think other religions hold equal truth and salvation. If they cannot water down the Gospel, they will finally leave. They have no appetite for Jesus Christ as who He really is, and so they leave. No one has to kick them out even; if the heat is hot enough in a fellowship, the wolves will run away.

It’s hard to see anybody leave. We want so much for people to stay, and we yearn for them in Christ. Surely a compromise is possible so that we can all be at one table. However, the cost is too great if it means a revision of what we once held as the Gospel. This is why John says, “Let what you heard in the beginning abide in you.” The emphasis here is not on trying to change others but on holding to what the anointing taught in the beginning. Why would a believer suddenly need a new teacher or teachers? If the anointing convinced the believer in the first place, what would change that? Clearly, only deception would threaten to undo the whole meaning of Christ’s blood as the cleaning agent for sin. This is why John said earlier, “He is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (2:2 RSV).

What could be plainer than that John’s point is that Christ’s blood isn’t just God’s way for one part of the world but for the entire world. If anything is secure about a biblical view of the nations, it is that the promise to Abraham encompassed all the nations, and biblical eschatology over and over affirms the same—namely that the God of the Bible will rule the nations, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

John concludes this section by saying how the anointing in his children teaches them the very things he is saying, for “you all know”; so his letter isn’t to scare them into introspection about themselves but to shore up their awareness of antichrist’s strategy to erode the fellowship. Note that John is not talking about church splits over other points of doctrine or gray area behavioral issues. Only one thing is in view, the centrality of the

blood of Christ and the anointing from Christ as the only way of salvation offered by God to the world.

The closing words urge them to abide so that no one will need to “shrink from Him in shame at His coming.” The inference is that giving in to deceivers is people pleasing and shrinking from Christ, which then leads to the unrighteous living that the deceivers practice and seek to justify, which then piles up more shame because the one who does not abide falls back into the very life that he or she escaped from through Christ. However, John, like the writer of Hebrews, sees his children as those who do know and who will not succumb to the subtle deception trying to take root among them.

In the next lesson, we will see John’s great outpouring of affection and affirmation toward his children. Stay tuned!

1 John 3:1-10

1 John 3 can be a confusing chapter apart from the context of what John has already said. On the surface, chapter 3 can sound as if to commit a sin makes one belong to the devil as master, or as if a Christian cannot commit a sin. Neither of those options makes any sense. Already, John has addressed three stages of growth in God’s children, and plainly, he tells us of a progression from still committing sins, to learning to abide in Christ, whereby the evil one is overcome as the believer learns the steady walk of abiding. Then, sins and the sin consciousness drop away.

But even considering the little children level, John says that his readers are the children of God, and what love that is! So there’s no doubt on the identity level and no reason to wait out a probation period before being able to know that one is God’s own child. Just as Paul wrote with all affection and affirmation to a very carnal Corinthian church, not questioning who they were or that they belonged to Christ, John equally, never uses the possibility or actuality of sins committed as a reason to suggest anxious introspection over one’s salvation. How beautiful to say, “Beloved, we are God’s children now.”

Of course here’s the shock that comes with the fact that to be a Christian puts one out of step with the world, and so I remind myself not to be surprised when the news so seldom reports on the kingdom of God. Therefore, I don’t think, “What am I doing wrong that the world doesn’t see who I am?” If the world does not acknowledge you as a Christian, you’re manifesting the one who lives in you, which is a good sign.

John then says, “we know that when he appears we shall be like him.” This means that somehow we are not like Him now, even though John later says, “as he is so are we in this world” (4:17), so the idea in 3:2 is about outer form, not inner being. Mortal bodies still carry around the light of Christ, and we don’t look like glorious beings with bodies of dust wearing hard and falling apart as the years go by. What we long for is the new body, which Paul also tells us: “Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling” (2 Cor. 5:2 RSV). Think of the appearance of Jesus in the book of Revelation

and how different his appearance is from a Nazarene carpenter, unsuspected of being anything other than the ordinary son of Mary and Joseph. Someday, we will look quite different too, still human, but oh so glorious and with surprising variation of light, colors, and materials.

John now switches to our inner life, saying the believer is to “purify himself as he is pure.” Purity means unmixed, so the idea of purifying does not imply self works or self improvement—an impossibility—but rather faith that learns to resolve its doubts without foolish visits into Romans 7 living. John probably would call it pure abiding, without needless lapses. Abiding is His word, and his vista assumes that children of God live in righteousness, with their faith overcoming the bumps of unbelief and moving into consistent abiding. That’s why with even Christians we would call little children, we say that they do what is right, for indeed they do, unless they fall into a sin. The fact that they will have to sort out what independent seeing is and how abiding remedies that, does not constitute them in the main as those who do not do what is right.

This brings us to the statement, “No one who abides in him sins.” Again, we see the parallel to Paul’s Galatian statement, “Walk in the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal. 5:17 NASB). When facing temptation to sin, success comes from walking in the Spirit, not the self trying not to sin, which only leads back to Romans 7. Although it looks like John could be saying that one who knows union with Christ cannot commit a sin, he is not saying that: he is saying that the big magnet of the Spirit draws the children in, and as they learn not to fight that, they are kept and sin drops away, both sins and the sin consciousness.

Similarly, the converse works the same way. With those belonging to the devil, sin is their home base, and occasional good works do not change that. One of my favorite passages in *Who Am I?* by Norman Grubb has a chapter called “Have We Two Natures?” A phrase that has stuck in my mind for years is his “centre and circumference” (72). Norman says, “The centre is the set of our lives, and circumference is what may temporarily influence us.” He goes on to say, “So now a slave of Satan can go and do a few good and religious things for a time, but that doesn’t change his basic slavery. So equally a slave of Jesus can be tempted to exercise his human freedom in the ways of the flesh and does so, but back he comes to whom he belongs” (72). I can’t say it better than that, and I think Norman perfectly captures John’s intent. When John talks about those who “commit sin,” he means those who still belong to sin and can never rise out of it, despite good works, because they have not yet taken Christ as their savior.

You can live in the assurance that you are a child of God, and you can know that those whose lives are set on sin still belong to the devil. Even a disobedient child knows who his father is, and a Christian caught in sin will return home. It can look messy and take a while, but the Father doesn’t lose His kids.

Next time, the lesson will look at Cain and Abel and how love figures in.

1 John 3: 11-18

John leaves a lot unsaid in his letter, which can be disturbing to the unpracticed reader, and the volumes John left unsaid used to trouble and tempt me into many rational mazes and tangles since his statements are black and white. With teaching like John's, a reader must ponder and put two and two together, for John leaves much unsaid or not obviously connected for the very reason that this wisdom approach drives us through self discovery into the depths of what he is saying, and John knows that what we see that way will stick much better, and that the anointing we rely on to interpret his letter will be our joy and making.

The last lesson was a riddle indeed in some ways since John said, "He who commits sin is of the devil" (3:8). This could look like an assertion that every time a Christian sins, he is of the devil, yet we know that John doesn't mean that we flip flop back and forth between belonging to Christ and belonging to the devil, as if a person is a slave of one master one day and another master the next. No, ownership is definite, and a sin in a Christian does not shift ownership to the devil, just as a good work in a non Christian does not shift ownership from the devil to Christ. We are slaves of one master only, and ultimately, it is expedient to discern the course of things and go ahead and abide in our master without diversions.

However, as a youthful Christian, I wanted God, but I wanted the flesh too if I could make it work. I didn't want to be a lost person; I just wanted to do some of the things lost people do since they brought pleasure on a body or soul level. In this, I was not thinking, "What is love? What is best for another person?" Simply put, I wanted forgiveness and heaven but carnality now. If that could work, depression wouldn't be the big business it is, and we could get on with life as saved animals, awaiting our great grazing pastures in the pearly beyond. God, though, intends us to be sapient beings who experience the fires of choice in our freedom, engage an enemy to defeat him, and take our place as lord over creation as God created Adam to do.

So what is John doing when he says that those who commit sin are of the devil? I think the answer is simple, now that I see what he is doing in this passage. First, he is affirming that the non Christian does belong to the devil and is of the devil. Cain illustrates this in his envy and hostility toward his brother Abel, who had learned that no such thing as self righteousness exists. Yes, one can act self righteously, but that is a lie, and Abel had discovered that he had no righteousness of his own, and so he needed a blood sacrifice to worship God and be made right with Him. Of course, this came by revelation, and Abel accepted it and entered into a blood covenant with God, and when you think about it, this was not easy since such a covenant is predicated on violence and gore, as well as humbling the worshipper.

Cain, on the other hand, based his self worth on what he himself accomplished with his hands, and so he presented the fruits of his own labors, which could not be accepted, for such would be to say, "Despite the fall of my father Adam, I present my works as

justification of myself in your world, O Lord.” But when Cain saw that God accepted Abel’s sacrifice but not his, the devil, who owned him, surged up and led his slave, Cain, to murder Abel. In this we see that Cain acted as the slave of the devil who owned him, and apart from moving in the direction of Abel’s faith, Cain had no control over where the devil would eventually take him. Likely, Cain began with hurt and angry feelings, then let resentment build, until the fires of hatred became so hot, that the move to murder followed the escalating chain of violence. What began with wrathful feelings, moved probably to taunting and spiteful words, to more physical gestures perhaps, and finally murder.

Now we come to why John sets forth Cain as an example to his beloved children. He in no way means for them to introspect in fear as if they really have belonged to the devil and only masqueraded as Christians. That is not his purpose. What John means to do is cement in his readers’ minds the fact that the unsaved person is not just an independent person who is self operating but instead belongs to an owner: “Cain was of the evil one.” This is much scarier than the notion that a human being is self operated and does things, good or evil, out of a choice and ability to moderate behavior.

Also, it is vital to see that the unsaved person cannot just will himself into reform; he must experience being owned by the new master, Jesus Christ, and abide in Him, to live a righteous life, knowing that righteousness does not come from the Christian himself, but from His master within, Jesus Christ, who lives His life in His children via His anointing. This puts the axe to the idea that someone can commit murder yet be rehabilitated in a program of self improvement.

The application to Christians follows easily. John knows what the carnal Christian has not accepted yet, namely that to imitate apparent lesser sins of the non Christian, or one’s own former life, is like playing with matches. The Christian who wishes to be carnally minded thinks, “I will only go so far; I will not get out of control.” However, this is dangerous since to give oneself to a supposed lesser sin, opens the door to flesh level control by the devil, who doesn’t own us any more but who operates by the same nature he always does. Little enticements lead to bigger ones, and the train is off the tracks. No, the Christian hasn’t lost his salvation and still belongs to his owner, Jesus Christ, but he was wandered away into darkness and death, and the consequences can be dire. John is saying, “When you play with sin, you don’t know how far it will take you. Do you really want to take a chance with the devil?”

Yet John’s appeal is not primarily on the negative side in this passage because his focus really is love. As children of God, we are children of love, beget by love, and though love is not a quality of being human, it is the nature of the one who indwells us. John will tell us later, “God is love.” Love means a life of being for others, the expression of that love being laying down our lives for the brethren. Jesus went all the way to death to lay his life down for us, and we may be called upon to do that, yet life holds daily opportunities to share with those in need on a material level and a spiritual level. John says that love cannot just stare at need next to one and close up the heart. John doesn’t set rules here

about giving, but he does tell us the sign of danger, closing the heart, the tone of which is cold and aloof. Further, he says that deeds, not words, make the difference. He sounds like James; how about that!

The overall tone in the passage is twofold. First, playing with matches can start a big fire, and the devil is behind that, so it's necessary to see who the sin operator is and not play on his turf. More importantly, abiding in love is the cure for danger. Love seeks the best for others, and the children of God are the brethren, the family of God, and God gives us lots of opportunities to show His love to others.

1 John 3: 19-24

John has just talked about how words without deeds do not give us a sense of completeness in love. How well I remember my old mentor, Norman Grubb, talking about the progression that goes from thought to word to deed. By this he did not mean soul thoughts that fluctuate and are not on the intent level yet. Instead, the meant spirit level thought—the thoughts we really have underneath reason and emotion. God created us to operate as persons like this, and this is exactly what John has been saying. When faith makes that final leap to the action level, there is no satisfaction and confirmation like that! John does not mean works on a flesh level—going back to law—but the labor pains of faith.

Nothing compares to manifestation; the transformed one says, “Eureka!” Really, this is Spirit 101 common sense. If a guy proposes to a girl but never goes to the altar, she won't be satisfied with that.

What holds up the action level? John says “whenever our hearts condemn us,” indicating a lack of completeness that haunts a person until words and deeds correspond. Does the condemnation originate on the heart level as if the heart is still darkness and light? I don't think that's the meaning here, but rather that the heart is where the enemy attacks, and the heart is the seat of love in our spirits. Satan naturally would go for that.

Now John switches suddenly to saying, “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” This seems no comfort at first, for one might think, “Good for God that He is omniscient, but I'm still bothered by this condemnation that comes at me on a heart level.” Wait a minute, that means that God knows everything, including all the circumstances I'm responding to and everything about me and how He is leading me. He certainly does not mean for me to go back under law; that would only lead to condemnation, so there is nothing to do but trust the Spirit and go with how the Spirit leads when faced with others' needs.

Really too, another issue comes out in this passage, namely the leap from what others say about us to what the Spirit says to us. For years, mentors told me wonderful things about myself that sounded too good to be true, and I did not believe for myself. They told me wonderful things from scripture that sounded too good to be true, and I did not believe for myself. First came words that agreed in some measure with what they said, as well as

some fledgling steps of faith on an action level. But a person finally must know inwardly from the Spirit. Instead of asking only our teachers, we begin to ask God Himself.

Asking is key; nothing in the daily business of faith gets done without asking. Jesus said, ask, seek, knock. First, we ask for ourselves, then for others. John has brought us to the point of seeing needs in others and responding not only in words but also in deeds. That is body level action, and intercession is body level action. If I learned anything from Norman about intercession, it was that. But often when we see need, the enemy attacks with fear, and we feel inadequate and perhaps even unwilling to move to action. Condemnation looms, tempting us to think, "I'm not really serious about helping; I'm just one to take care of myself after all. What a disappointment." However, no one has to take that dart. I've learned increasingly to simply say, "I don't take it!"

At times like this, we want our mentors to do it for us, but they can't. It's not meant to be. Now is the time to continue in Jesus Christ and trust that God hasn't made an error in facing us off with a situation that looks unwelcome at first. This is why John tells us that God knows everything. From our vantage point, we will think, "There's a mistake here; a misdeal has occurred." No, what looks like a mistaken arrangement is actually God's omniscient and perfect plan for involving us with someone, probably someone that we wouldn't think of or choose. In a fellowship, varieties of strange and different likes and dislikes come together, and initial discomfort at first over that, especially when some need not only spiritual fellowship but material help as well. How does one help? Walking in faith, the next move will come to mind.

This section closes with the affirmation that keeping His commandments means sticking with Jesus Christ and loving one another. This is impossible on a human level, so when I stop occasionally and realize that I am doing it, I think, "What a miracle; this is not coming from me." When you see someone doing these things, you can know that they only come from abiding, and we know that by the Spirit John says.

The thrust of the passage then is moving out in faith on the action level, having heard the word of our mentors, but now stepping out into action ourselves with confidence in asking God what He would have us do in the unpredictable sea of needs that confront us once we are off of ourselves and into how Christ will be Himself as us to others.

1 John 4:1-12

1 John Chapter 4 makes an advance in John's approach, for he now clearly separates the spirit world and the matter world, and without that distinction, people still seem like just people with their various opinions and views. Accordingly, before this distinction, human reason gets tabbed as the fulcrum of thinking. However, now John has pushed his children to test the spirits for themselves, which indicates that they are ready to live competently in a world where everything derives from one of two spirits—the spirit of truth or the spirit of error. His children might fear being confused about how to distinguish the Spirit of God from the spirit of antichrist, but John assures them that they know how to do this.

First, he says what he has emphasized all along, that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, which means that the eternal Christ came and manifested Himself in human form, as fully a man in every way that a human is a human. Not to confess this is the spirit of antichrist, which is a real spirit abroad in the world, speaking through the false prophets, who do not speak from their own minds, though they might think so, but from the spirit of error operating in them.

This could make the world seem terrifying, and believers overmatched by demonic power, but John assures even those he addresses as little children, that they, the children, are “of God, and have overcome them.” He does not say that they will overcome but that they have overcome, “for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” Therefore, it is not super spiritual and for superheroes to defeat the forces of darkness; even a child in Christ can recognize the deception described here, for think of it, how blatant is it when someone denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. This is elementary stuff, like parents warning their children not to get into cars with strangers. Even a child can discern this error and not get led astray.

Yet feelings of fear can crop up any time for anyone since to live in the world means desire to subsist and cohabit, not wishing to make enemies or stir conflict. However, the devil never rests, and so the devil’s agents—those of the spirit of error—constantly create trying circumstances, even tribulation, for the children of God. This is no mistake, for God has assigned the devil a prescribed range of influence in this present world, and John calls the devil “he who is in the world.”

Life is disturbing when a person fears the enemy more than trusting God. I’d like to say that this has never been my experience, but it was, and at my low point, my friend Scott knocked on my door one morning and in such an affirming way, said, “Remember, He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” I heard the scripture, but it seemed remote and far off—impossible, yet I remembered it, and later, those words came to life in me.

Now John builds on the fact of the two spirits operating, for those spirits manifest in those who are “of the world” and those who are “of God.” The world in view is not the terra firma we live on but the world in the sense of those who worship the physical creation and their sensory involvement in it. They do not see the world as a manifestation of God’s glory, but as a sensual experience in a self-for-self way. This is the world, and the deception of a materialistic universe comes in fact from the spirit of error. Try as one might, man can never be at ease living like an animal.

If you’ve experienced church splits, you know that this verse—“We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us”—can bring up horrible associations. John, though, is not talking about doctrinal disagreements among Christians but the difference between the world and the church, between the spirit of error and the spirit of truth. Sadly, all too much destructiveness goes on among those in Christ, diverting the children of God from John’s next topic—love. “He who loves is born of God and knows God.”

By this he does not mean that Christians are not capable of that which is not love. Surely they are, though such is unnecessary because of the One who lives in us. Until the children of God know that, love gets forgotten at times, but as practice in abiding grows, love flourishes.

First, what is love? “Love is of God,” and further, “God is love.” That says it, God is a person. My introduction to this came through a story that Norman Grubb told many times. When he was a young missionary on the field in the Congo, the early inspiration of going to the field wore off. The honeymoon was over you might say. Loving those that God called him to serve proved beyond his reach, and so he prayed, “God, give me more love.” What a shock registered in him when the Holy Spirit quickly rebuffed him by saying, “Shut up!” A tart reply like this could seem unlike the sweet and gentle dove. Norman obeyed, however, and the Holy Spirit brought to Norman the verse, “God is love.” Norman saw that love is a person and that love is not something that God dispenses in packets.

Having established that love is a person, the nature of love needs examining, and as such, John again mentions that Christ is the “expiation for our sins,” which means the atonement for our sins. We cannot compensate for sins by our own works, so “God sent his only son into the world.” Jesus Christ was God’s supreme sacrifice, the uttermost that love is. Such love is not mere erotic feeling or the pleasantness of human camaraderie or friendship but the sacrifice of the self for others who may not even appeal to us in any way or deserve that love. Love acts as love because it can do no other, and God is Himself the love, having made the eternal choice to spare no sacrifice, even death on a Cross, to rescue those in need who are willing.

From there, John says, “we ought to love one another.” This can sound like legalism, but it is not different than saying, “A plane ought to fly. If it’s a plane, it ought to fly since it’s designed for that very thing.” Clouds ought to rain, grass ought to grow, and children ought to play. Such is the fabric of things. John has said, “He who loves is born of God and knows God,” which is to say, “If someone loves, you can be sure that person is born of God since it is impossible to love without God being that love in the person.” By love, John doesn’t mean human love or human charitable works but love that comes from God Himself.

This section closes with the curious verse, “No man has ever seen God.” Of course, the prologue to John’s Gospel includes this statement, but it suddenly pops up here in the discussion about love. The reason is that, just as John’s Gospel says, God’s love is manifested in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ. That is God’s chosen means of showing His love. And now that Christ has ascended, we have the record of that, but love is now expressed to the world in the form of Christ’s body—those in whom He abides.

As such, no one will see God, and only a few saw God’s Son Jesus Christ while He was alive on earth. However, Jesus Christ is on the earth in those in whom He abides. They are the love, meaning we who believe, and “his love is perfected in us.” The reference to

perfecting of course can indicate a process, for it is true that we didn't see all of this at once, and so we experienced the shocks of coming to the end of seeing ourselves separated from Christ. However, the idea of perfecting also means to bring to completion, and John's reach here, I think, goes to removing the gap in one's consciousness that still makes provision for the self in a separated way.

Last, the idea of perfecting, I think, means that Christ's love would be incomplete if He alone as a human expressed the love of God. To perfect what it means to be human as God intends, the children of Christ are as Christ. They are His love, really and truly in a human form in this world, and that is why the exhortation to love is so important. It's not just the love, but also who the love is.

One more thought comes up on the verse "we also ought to love one another." I remember how I always felt puzzled and disturbed by the *ifs* and *oughts* in John's letter, and so one day when Norman was visiting my mother-in-law Mimi back in the 1980s, I asked him why John uses the words *if* and *ought* in his epistle. Norman quickly replied, "So that you can take them out!" I can't add to that.

1 John 4:13-21

John shifts emphasis so often and so quickly in his first epistle that a reader can feel disoriented at times by such a compressed, rapid style. However, I find John's unique ways exciting and full of riddles, which Proverbs says is good: "to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles" (1:4 RSV). It's certainly not a riddle, though, to see several of John's main points repeatedly surface as centers of focus in his short but direct letter.

For example, in the lesson today, once again John makes clear that the faith is centered in "the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world." John has just been talking about love and how that we are now the manifest expressions of God's love since Jesus Christ abides in us. Now he says that we know this by the Spirit. In other words, we cannot know a thing merely of ourselves and human reason; it takes the witness of the Spirit to confirm a thing to us, and that is exactly what the Spirit does. We may experience a gap between a faith stand and experiencing the Spirit's witness, but that is only to test us on the front end.

As short as this epistle is, John knows that repetition is the teacher's friend, and John knows how to repeat himself by saying what he said and setting it in a new order and highlighting other related points. So he says again, "God is love," and that God's love is "perfected with us." Now when he mentions the perfecting, he adds in that this gives us confidence for the "day of judgment." This confidence does not mean that we will experience that day in a wrathful way but that we can live knowing that we won't. The worst that will happen to any Christian is an in-house burning away of wood, hay, and stubble as Paul calls it, which we desire to happen anyway, as well as a life now that by abiding, uses less of those materials anyway.

This truth is affirmed by the great affirmation, “as he is so are we in this world.” Like Son, like sons, for the Son is Himself in the sons, and the manifestation of that emerges as abiding becomes the normal state of living. John has already indicated that this is the expected transition from the little children level to the young man level in Chapter 2, where the young man discovers that he has overcome the evil one by the word of God abiding within.

The main enemy of this development is fear. At first it is a challenge to believe that we are safe in God’s love. We relate to God and get secured in knowing His nature and learning from His Spirit. Then we find there’s that brother to relate to. Oh my, that can be stressful. Fear wants to make us think that we can’t do it. Fear says that sooner or later, we will cave in and not love, but hate. Along with fear come torment and dread of punishment.

This is such a great test, though very unwelcome in immature days. How well I remember going up to Norman one time after one of his talks and pouring out my woes of temptation and soul anguish. To my consternation, he lit up and beamed like a radiant orb as he exclaimed, “Wonderful! Very healthy! Good practice!” I wanted to choke him. Fear still looked more real than the promises of God.

How interesting that John says, “perfect love casts out fear.” He doesn’t just say that love casts out fear. The word *perfect* carries the idea of completed and brought to a sense of a thing being what it is made to do. For example, the perfect pencil is the one that writes the way that you need it to. It may be a humble looking pencil, but it does what its fashioner manufactured it to do; it writes. Similarly, my watch tells time. It perfectly does what the watchmaker made it to do.

Yet we can look at our brother, look at ourselves, and think, “It can’t be done. It can’t last.” So we look as always to the One who can, the One in us who is love, for again John has inserted, “God is love.” We’ll always look at ourselves, our feelings, and our thoughts—initially tempted to sink. Even when settled about one person, here comes another brother who tests us. How great!

I see that John adds, “We love, because he first loved us.” As always with John, I stop and ask, “Why did he put this here?” Well, John is telling us that we don’t wait around for others to love us first. That’s the way I lived when I was immature. If someone didn’t make over me, I went on to someone else who would. Corollary to that is the need to have my needs met if I’m to continue loving. If the other person ignores me, hurts me, or doesn’t meet my needs, that’s the end of love from my end. But with the love of God, though we feel all the hurts and rebuffs, love goes on, for love is according to the will. Love operates by the will and the will operates by faith. One doesn’t need to feel love in order to love.

This section ends with a *should*: “he who loves God should love his brother also.” As always, faith takes out the *should* and makes it an *is*. How glorious that the same love that

God is and that God knows as His own nature gets formed in His family of children. “As he is so are we” closes the gap, and the branch is as the vine is.

1 John 5:1-5

Now we come to the closing chapter in John’s first epistle. John has just said that it can’t work to say one loves God but not one’s brother. Continuing on that, we read, “Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God.” How family-like this is; God is the parent, and all who believe in His Son constitute His children, and we know how parents are about their children. A parent may be furious with a child that needs disciplining, but let an outsider attack the child as worthless, and the parent will rise up! Justly so, I might add, the implication being that discipline is a matter within the family as prescribed by the parent.

As children of God, we’re stuck with each other and even told to love one another: “every one who loves the parent loves the child” (5:1 RSV). However, does the temptation arise to love indulgently and unwisely? Well, if temptation is temptation and includes the full range of human experience, then certainly love gets tested when someone needs discipline. To stay comfortable and feel loving may not produce love. What’s best for someone may not feel loving and comfortable to say or do. From an offended person on the receiving end of what doesn’t look like love might come the cry, “You think you’re administering tough love, but you’re not.”

How can one know? John anchors love once again in God Himself: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.” In other words, if someone’s cry for love pulls us away from God as our first love and from God as the one we obey, then the pull cannot be love. Countless times, I’ve gone against what others think I should say or do in the name of love, but I went against what others thought not simply to take a stand and try to be an individual, but because genuinely I had different directives from the Holy Spirit, and once a person learns to listen for the Holy Spirit, that’s it for trying to fit in or stay on the happy side of somebody.

God is a jealous God, and nowhere does it show up more than when another human being gets put before God. Though commanded to love our brothers, and though commanded to listen to the exhortations of our brothers, each Christian has the same built in capacity with the new birth to hear God and obey His personalized directive, whether that directive comes directly from the Spirit, or comes through the exhortation of a brother. Either way, the exhortation has to be quickened by the Spirit in the hearer.

I remember a Bible study at Mimi’s back in the 1980s where Fred Pruitt taught from 1 Kings Chapter 13 about the prophet God sent to Jeroboam. After delivering God’s message, God also instructed the prophet not to return by the way he came. However, another prophet, an old one, heard about the word of the younger prophet to Jeroboam and told him that an angel of the Lord had directed him to host the younger prophet. The upshot is that the Lord slew the younger prophet.

A great deal of stress blows up when dealing with conflicting views and claims, so the children of God have to know God's voice for themselves, which is why one of my favorite verses is, "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27). It's not that hard, but people pleasing makes it hard. Really, hearing the shepherd is easy, just costly much of the time since God's leading in us so often conflicts with others.

Two points have arisen here, that of discipline, and that of guidance. Concerning discipline, I have learned that much of the time, we see others that need discipline, but it's not in our authority to bring it about, and so we feel helpless as we watch others. However, it is better for all to leave those matters to God and to the specific ones responsible for making input into the lives of others. One of the deepest works of the Cross in any human being is learning to bridle the tongue and keep hands off. It's just as costly to not speak or act as it is to speak or act, so there's no easy way whether one gets overtly involved or doesn't. The world doesn't know this, and so the ways of the world keep those of the world in constant gossip, meddling, and turmoil—full of blame and accusation from the enemy.

Thus, John tells us, "whoever is born of God overcomes the world." No longer are we subject to the chaotic and endless passions that rip the world apart constantly. Though tempted to step in again as we once did when of the world, "this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith." Faith, as we know, operates from the quiet stillness and certainly that lie beneath the raging on the surface.

John finishes his point by again saying that it is impossible for anyone to overcome the world except by believing "that Jesus is the Son of God." No one can live like God except God and those in whom God lives, and He lives in people through His Son. So when you see people doing the impossible—overcoming the world—you can know that it's the faith of Jesus.

1 John 5:6-12

John now opens a fascinating section by mentioning the one "who came by water and blood." Jesus Christ did not come by water only. In customary laconic style, John doesn't explain but assumes the reader's access elsewhere to the key. Not only that, he says "the Spirit is the witness," followed by three witnesses: "the Spirit, the water, and the blood." How rich this little nugget is. Let's explore.

If one looked up the word *water* in a concordance to do an exhaustive study, the project could turn into a shelf of books about water. We know that water means purification, as evidenced by the red heifer in Numbers Chapter 19, where the water of purification is obtained in order to cleanse from contact with corpses. The connection to Hebrews 10:22, where our bodies are "washed with pure water" now, is exhilarating. Then too, water can mean living water, as when Jesus offered living water to the Samaritan woman. The idea is the water of life, and she was at a well, thus suggesting drinking, and we drink water because our bodies are mostly made of water.

However, I'm suggesting that by water, John in this passage intends baptism. Think about how many people assume that baptism has saving powers, yet we know that lots of people get baptized who don't believe. Baptism saves no one, just like a wedding ring is not a marriage. This doesn't negate the water; it puts it in perspective.

Now oddly, John doesn't give an account in his Gospel of Jesus' baptism, yet he does quote John the Baptist as saying, "I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel" (1:31 RSV). The obvious implication is that John baptized Jesus so that Jesus would be revealed. However, John's baptism was one of repentance and making ready for the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, so John the Baptist hesitated at first to baptize Jesus as we learn from the synoptic accounts. Assured by Jesus, he proceeded to baptize Jesus, and the Holy Spirit bore witness from the Father about God's only Son.

This baptism, as we know, was not about Jesus needing to repent, so one must look elsewhere to find the meaning, and the birth of Moses gives us a clue since Moses is a type of Christ. After the midwives delivered Moses, his mother hid him as long as she could and then put him in a little basket like an ark and placed that little haven among the bulrushes close to the river bank. Moses was as good as dead unless the water became a womb to birth him from above, and sure enough that happened.

The account of Jesus with Nicodemus supports the idea of water as a womb for the new birth. After Nicodemus has puzzled about the necessity of being born anew, Jesus says, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5 RSV). Likely, Nicodemus has been focused on earthly water in the natural sense, possibly both in the temple sense and in the earthly birth of babies. Jesus takes the new birth, however, to the spiritual level, implying living water and a heavenly womb. One must be born again from the "mother above" as Paul calls her in Galatians 4:26—born from the womb of living waters. This is a supernatural birth producing a new creation, as Paul calls it in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

No wonder then that John's epistle mentions three witnesses—"the Spirit, the water, and the blood." The new birth is so radical that it must be differentiated from all earthly images of water under the Old Covenant and according to the natural world and its rituals.

Having mentioned the Spirit and the water, the blood now stands out as obviously the blood of Jesus for the expiation of our sins. The new birth is so radical that it requires the operation of the Spirit, living water as a womb, and the blood of Jesus to wash away our sins. Not one of these can be left out. They are all supernatural witnesses, and John doesn't negate the "testimony of men," but he says "The testimony of God is greater."

No matter what men say, the testimony of God is our essential, and God spoke concerning His Son, and to refute that makes God "a liar," a very dangerous thing to do. Once again, John has told us who Jesus is, but he also says what the Father says about

Jesus, and that eternal life “is in his Son.” “He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life.”

I remember sitting next to a lady once on an airplane, and having gotten into a conversation, Jesus came up, and she expressed strong offense at the idea that Jesus is the only way. I told her that I didn’t come up with this but that Jesus Himself says this, and He’s the one I’m going with.

1 John 5:13-18

John has been talking about eternal life and how life is a person, namely the person of the Son. God doesn’t give us a thing called life apart from Christ; rather, “this life is in his Son” (4:12 RSV). Interestingly, John now comments to those “who believe in the name of the Son of God.” Everybody has a name, and the Son has a name as well, and how well I remember my Old Testament Bible class at the University of North Carolina, when Dr. Bernard Boyd emphasized that a person’s name had great meaning special to that person. Thus, John has been very specific about the Son being named Jesus Christ. Though the term *Christ* or *Messiah* had connoted an office or position in Old Testament prophecy, it also connoted a real and specific person who would uniquely fulfill that prophecy.

Also, John has written to believers “that you may know that you have eternal life.” So his purpose isn’t to shake them but to give them confidence. He has already in previous sections said that they know God, they have an anointing that teaches them, and they comprise a fellowship in which little children are growing into young men and young men into fathers.

As such they learn that if one of them sins, there is an advocate. They also learn that sin is not necessary and that by abiding, they are kept from sin. In this, we see the maturation process of coming to know who they are, and John never addresses them as those who do not know the Father. The possibility of sin is realistically acknowledged, but more to the point is the life free from sin. That is the intended norm.

Naturally then, we would ask God for things. Here is the trilogy: know, ask, receive. We know God, we ask things from Him, and we receive them. What a wonderful experience! Although many things could merit attention, John mentions only one thing, and that is sin in a brother. In contrast to many other places in scripture, he does not mention any specific sins, which can be curious and provoking and even lead to alarm in what John goes on to say about sin that leads to death. Remember, though, that he is not trying to alarm his readers but instruct them in how to pray for the brother who sins, plus he is incredibly concise and non detailed: there is sin not unto death, and there is sin unto death.

The RSV says, “sin which is mortal” and “sin which is not mortal.” I’ll stick with death here, though I like the RSV translation. However, death is a prolific Bible word, and we know what it means on a physical level and on a spiritual level.

Could John mean death on a physical level? Certainly, in both the Old and New Testaments we find sins punished by physical death, such as Paul’s reference in 1 Corinthians 11:30 to those who died because of not discerning the Lord’s body in communion. They are “guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.” Then there is the death of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 for lying to the Holy Spirit. Then too, death can come as a consequence of certain actions. For example, physical addictions possess the potential to health and even end life.

However, I don’t really think though that John is talking on the level of physical death. Spiritual death is more on his mind. If we look at the flow of his letter, he has constantly affirmed the faith and anointing of his readers and their maturing through the three stages, namely little children, young men, and fathers. Therefore, they are moving increasingly into life and learning that life is a person, Jesus Christ, not a thing God gives to us called life. Along the way, they learn to confess Christ’s forgiveness and cleansing for sins. My old mentor Norman always said, “Quick sin, quick cleanse; don’t commit the second sin, which is condemnation.” This is John’s spirit concerning sin among the brethren. These are sins not unto death because spiritual death is not our realm any more. We are in the kingdom of light, and we start our growth process as little children, and little children sin their sins, and the parents correct them. John has told us how that works in the family of God.

So that leaves the quandary over what John means by the sin unto death. I think the answer is easy, though I did read many sources and their discussion about what the sin unto death is. If you Google “1 John 5:16” you will find many outstanding articles, and I pondered them. What has helped me most is to remember that John’s epistle is very directional, meaning that people move in one direction or another. They either move more into light or more into darkness as a way of life. Darkness means not admitting that one has sinned; not continuing in the faith about who Jesus is; and not showing love for God, His commandments, and others.

In this, John lines up with Paul’s “if indeed you continue” in Colossians 1:23 (NASB). Peter expresses this by saying, “The dog turns back to its own vomit” (2 Pet. 2:22). For scary passages, it’s hard to beat Hebrews Chapters 6 and 10 where we read of those once enlightened “who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit” (6:4) and those who “sin deliberately after receiving knowledge of the truth” (10:26).

Are we to forget all the affirmations John has given us about who we are and now introspect with dread and torment over whether we are really God’s children? Of course not, John is writing about the same people that he has written about all along in this epistle: those who say they have not sinned, those who walk in darkness as their chosen

domain, those who deny who Jesus is, and those who practice sin and never call it what it is and never seek a remedy apart from their own works (really the spirit of error in them).

Yet we experience the dilemma of the church in which not all who start in the faith wish to remain in the faith but overtly or non overtly choose antichrist. This may not be obvious; in fact, the move toward a non Christian world view may start subtly and grow subtly. This is the sin unto death if persisted in.

John says, "I do not say that one is to pray for that." Again, the reason is simple. We know that death is supposed to sting us until we come to Christ. We know from Romans 7 that sin is supposed to defeat us until we see how God delivers us from trying. In other words, we know that no one, Christian or non Christian, is supposed to be at peace while sinning. Fire is supposed to burn us. With the Christian, sin is not unto spiritual death because sooner or later comes repentance and walking in faith. That is why John says, "God will give him life."

I take that as John's way of saying that our sin experiences propel us into asking how to be delivered, and so we move into abiding. We learn that life is a person, and this is what John has told us. He tells us again: "any one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him." This is why I say, "God, I will commit any sin unless You keep me, and thank You that You are keeping me." When I learned that, I moved from being a little child to a young man.

However, if one has not really decided on Christ and moves back into the sphere of the world and the devil, hoping for peace and soliciting prayer, what could one pray? God does not intend peace for that person, and so to pray that a person will have peace while at the same time rejecting the person of peace, Jesus Christ, would be contradictory.

Once again, John is all comfort and affirmation to his readers and writes only to sharpen them in discerning the difference between the two kingdoms—light and darkness.

1 John 5:18-21

As John closes his first letter, he tells us again, "any one born of God does not sin." Of course we know by now that he doesn't mean commit a sin; instead he sees God like a huge magnet that pulls in all His children so that they find sin dropping away and discover the highly energized orb of union with Christ, centered in rest and keeping. Increasingly consumed with God and His love interests, the children of God can't help then but know and glory in seeing how God expresses Himself as them, and they do not try to be like Christ; they find that His love abides in them and consumes them as surely as any fire ever burned its fuel, except in this case, we are not consumed but glorified. The burning fuel looks like the fire, but it is fire in its union with fuel.

Also, John adds, "He who was born of God keeps him," meaning that Jesus keeps us. He keeps us as His children, and He keeps us from sin. Now in my immature years as a

Christian, I did not want to be kept from sin, so in the smaller picture, God being the gentleman that He is, determined that I would be free to see how satisfying my carnal desires were. All they led to eventually was depression and the increasing awareness of the burden of self. I couldn't handle myself. In my heart I wanted God, but I had to expire in my immature wants and discover my real want, which was union with Christ.

This meant that Christ's ways would eventually win, and they did, not by my trying, but by my trying and wearing out with trying, for trying is still the mark of self, whereas faith is the invisible ease of knowing the keeping despite the excruciating aspects of life in a world still full of groaning and mortality.

Notice that Jesus "was born of God," meaning not only that He is the only begotten Son, but also that in His death, burial, and resurrection, He became the "first-born from the dead," as Paul says in Colossians 1:18 (RSV). Because of sin, we could not be born from the dead, but Christ could, and since we were crucified with Christ, we also died in Him and were raised in Him. Because Christ was born of God as a human, and we in Him, He keeps those born in Him.

Accordingly, "the evil one" does not "touch" us. Well it certainly feels like the evil one touches us, but actually the evil one cannot touch the inner man, only the outer man that is perishing anyway. Jesus said, "the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me" (John 14:30). Since Jesus is the one keeping us, the ruler of this world has no power over us. Becoming convinced of this is the young man stage that John described earlier in his letter: "I am writing to you young men, because you have overcome the evil one" (2:13). God already knows about us what we come to know, and God knows how to bring us to know.

A very unpleasant sifting process takes place to accomplish this, and none is exempt. Jesus told Peter that the devil would sift Peter, but Jesus also told Peter that He had prayed that Peter's faith would not fail (Luke 22:31). I always bet on a prayer by Jesus every time.

What a triumphant statement John then makes when he says, "We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one." That has something we like to hear and something we don't like to hear. On the one hand, it is good to know we are of God, and one indication is our obvious contrast to the world. John has already said, "the reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him" (3:1), and boy don't we see how true that is.

Now it might look like there are two powers, one power being God, but then also the power of the evil one as a dualistic, rivaling threat. Yet God reigns supreme, and the devil is a created being who is running out of time to have any influence over the world. God would have dispatched him out of the way by now except that God means the devil's works for a good purpose. The devil is evil, but God means evil for good, as Joseph said

to his brothers. My old mentor, Norman, always said, “The devil is God’s convenient agent,” and “We’re in Satan’s camp; he has a right to shoot at us.”

John makes his point in verse 19 to heighten the contrast, especially since those who do not know God have a penchant for trying to merge good and evil into one. In response, John has contrasted them to the uttermost in his letter. Therefore, we have “understanding,” he says to “know him who is true.” When I was a kid in the 1950s, I loved watching the television show *To Tell the Truth*. On the show, four panelists asked questions to a group of three anonymous visitors, one of whom was the real plumber, or doctor, or vacuum cleaner salesman, etc. After each panelist asked a few questions, each made a guess as to which visitor was the true practitioner and which two were the pretenders. John in his letter gives us understanding of how the anointing we have makes us know the true God and His Son Jesus Christ. He is eternal life, and we are in Him, John says.

Thus, not only is He in us, but we are also in Him. Think of how big that is. Jesus Christ is “eternal life,” John says, so think of how big Jesus and eternal life are. If you think that you might a little fearfully be just inside the outermost edge of Christ, that outermost edge is still eternal, which is to say, there is no just barely being in Christ.

The letter ends with what could look like a curious add on and one not relevant to the modern age where we’re not used to pagan temples with statues to bow down to, though the world does still have such places. Not only is John’s closing sentence so short; it comes without explanation. I would say that this is John’s one sentence version of the same point that Paul gives full exposition to in Romans Chapter 1.

And so ends the epistle, and I look forward to continued insights and richness from the Lord in meditating on it and thank Him for the privilege of writing about it.