

1st JOHN BIBLE STUDY

1 John 1:1-5

Lesson #1

Introduction

We're about to begin our study of John's first general epistle to the saints of the churches. We call it a general epistle because it isn't addressed directly to any single person or church, as many of the New Testament epistles are, especially those by Paul. But, like all the epistles, it is influenced by the prevailing situations that are currently occurring within the churches at the time that it's written. And John's epistle is clearly addressing certain situations that have prompted him to respond with this epistle.

It's generally believed that it was written between 90 and 95 A.D., at which time the emerging heresy of Gnosticism was rising to popularity. The teachings of popular secular philosophers, like Plato, were proposing the idea that good and evil were actually separated and divided between the flesh and the spirit. The flesh was evil, and the spirit was good, and therefore people could entertain their fleshly desires to their heart's content, and yet not damage their spirit by doing so. And; that there was the concept of the existence of a "higher knowledge" of things that transcended normal human knowledge, and gaining this "higher knowledge" elevated one beyond earthly perspectives and restrictions.

And, as is so often the case, this secular teaching found its way into the churches; primarily by way of false converts, but also sometimes just through the ignorance of immature believers, and began to influence the teachings and behaviors of the saints. We know from centuries of experience that the world is always offering its latest and most popular ideas and perspectives to the saints of the churches, and inviting them to jump on board, which sadly we seem to do, over and over again, with eager enthusiasm. And the greater the percentage of unregenerate members that occupy the churches, the quicker and more readily they embrace the world's latest secular perspectives on virtues and morality. Because the unregenerate heart relates perfectly to the thinking of the world, and agrees wholeheartedly with its ideas, regardless of the fact that they clearly violate the commandments of God described in scripture.

We're told to follow our heart's, that our heart's are like our guides, and that's absolutely true, they are our guides. But not every guide has the same motives nor proposed destination, and, not every heart has been regenerated and transformed by the Spirit of God. Some human guides will lead you to destruction if you follow them, and concerning the human heart, that we seem to believe always has only the best of intentions, thus says the Lord God: (Quoting)

9 "The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it? 10 "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, According to the results of his deeds. (Jer 17:9-10)

According to the scriptures, God's method of testing and evaluating the mind, is by examining the actions that it produces. So, where is our heart leading us? Is it to gladly obey the Lord's commandments, or is it to do what's right in our own eyes, regardless of God's commandments? Because, He will ultimately judge all of us on what we've done, not on what we've said or how we felt. Oh yes, how we feel does directly affect what we do, so the question we all must ask, the one that John will discuss at length in this epistle, is, just what does our heart really love? What do we truly desire, and what is our treasure. What do we truly pursue in earnest, in the deepest recesses of our hearts?

We must never think that we will ever inherit eternal life, and perfect righteousness, in a kingdom of God, when what we really desire in our heart's is to simply be exonerated of our guilt for the continued indulgence of the passionate desires of our flesh. As popular as this idea might be, it is certainly not supported anywhere in the scriptures. In fact, just the opposite, everywhere and every time. To examine our heart's is to examine our behaviors, as John will make crystal clear in this epistle, over and over again, because our actions are ultimately driven by those true desires that reside in the heart and mind of every person who lives. It isn't difficult or mysterious to determine, with absolute certainty, whether or not we are truly the children of God, because He has given us full access to the deepest recesses of our minds, and we know what we love and what we don't, and it's clearly corroborated by our routine daily practices. Now, with this established, we can move into the verses of our study. I've titled this lesson:

God's Message to Us

1 What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have observed, and have touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life — 2 that life was revealed, and we have seen it and we testify and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us — 3 what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may have fellowship along with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

5 Now this is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in Him. 6 If we say, “We have fellowship with Him,” and walk in darkness, we are lying and are not practicing the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say, “We have no sin,” we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say, “We have not sinned,” we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

1 John 1:1-10 (HCSB)

As we mentioned in our introduction, John's choice of words, (acknowledging the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) were influenced by the prevailing situations of the time. His opening lines are both inspiring and intentional in their content. Remember, the Gnostic heresy was just emerging, and one of the myriad of bizarre concepts was that Jesus couldn't have really been a flesh and blood human being, because all tangible matter is evil, and only spirit can be good. So it was supposed that Jesus was some kind of visual illusion, like a heavenly hologram in today's vernacular. But, with or without intention, this idea has immense repercussions. To make Jesus into something other than a real, flesh and blood human being is to disqualify Him in the eyes of God as a suitable sacrifice on behalf of humanity. God demands flesh for flesh as a sacrifice for sin, crucifying a hologram on a cross would not have been efficacious for the sins of man, or He certainly would have done so. Failure to think this concept through to its inevitable conclusion opened the door to a massive heresy that dishonored the enormous cost of the sacrifice provided by Jesus our Savior.

And this idea is set to rest by John as he declares that from the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus was a tangible, touchable, visible human man, who ate and drank and worked and slept, just like any other human being. He was not a heavenly hologram, He was a real man, who experienced joy and anguish, hunger and thirst, hot and cold, and suffered the ultimate indignity of rejection and public crucifixion unto death to please His Father and redeem His elect. To call any of this into question is to strike a blow at the gospel itself, and dishonor the Father who planned it, the Son who implemented it, and the Spirit who administered it. To deny either the deity or the humanity of Jesus Christ is to dishonor God in every manner possible, and certainly places all who do so clearly outside of orthodox Christianity.

But John wasn't just repudiating the Gnostic heresy, he was proclaiming a divine truth that he and his fellow Apostles had eye witnessed and personally experienced, and the subject of that was:

concerning the Word of life — 2 that life was revealed, and we have seen it and we testify and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.

John says that he and his companions witnessed the revelation of the Word of eternal divine life, that had been from the beginning with the Father, but became flesh, and lived and dwelled among them in their very sight. (Jn 1:14) They saw, touched, spoke with and experienced the manifestation of the divine life of God in the form of a human man. So the next sentence from his pen is the only possible result of such an experience: *3 what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may have fellowship along with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.*

This isn't something about which one can keep quiet. And we see that all over the gospels, where Jesus tells the people whom He healed to say nothing about it, but they immediately run all over town proclaiming the good news to everybody they met. And likewise, something of this magnitude of revelation just has to be shared to be appreciated. John says that what they saw and heard they just had to proclaim to others, so that they can be in fellowship with them in this revelation of divine life. And this fellowship isn't just between men, but it includes God who gave the revelation, and Jesus Christ His Son, who, by His blood makes this heretofore impossible fellowship, now possible. John says that sharing this truth, and the fellowship of joy that it invokes, is why he and his fellow Apostles have written all the New Testament scriptures.

Now we get to the verses that were used to select the title of this lesson, which, if you remember is “God’s Message to Us.” Once the messenger, Jesus Christ, has been defended as being both divine and human, and the joy of that revelation announced to all the saints, it’s time to turn to the essence of the message that this Jesus, the God/Man, has proclaimed. If he is who He says He is, then what did He tell us? John tells us this: *5 Now this is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you:*

Before I continue with this verse I want to make sure we’re ready to hear it. John is about to tell us Jesus’ testimony regarding his Father. We remember that the Father has twice previously testified to the world that Jesus is His beloved Son, in whom He is well pleased. (Mat 3:17; 17:5) So, what is Jesus’ testimony about His Father? What did He tell the disciples about His Father that they now want to pass along to everyone else? It’s not that there’s only one thing, the world couldn’t contain the things that could have been written about the Son, let alone the Father, but what is that one thing that sort of sums it all up, and aptly describes God the Father?

John is going to use a couple of metaphors in his answer, because by doing so, he can convey a whole host of thoughts and ideas simultaneously just by these few words. These are very rich and frequent metaphors used repeatedly in the scriptures, and always to convey the same concepts. So now, what was that testimony of Jesus? That: *God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in Him.* Rarely in literature has so much been said in so few words. It’s almost like the accounting of creation given in the book of Genesis. And, while it’s so simple that it’s almost axiomatic, nevertheless the implications, if pondered to their extremities, are beyond our comprehension.

First, let’s be sure we understand these metaphors. Light, as it’s being used here, is regarding holy perfection of virtue and nature, absolute righteousness, to the divine standard of measure. And darkness is sin, unrighteousness, flaws or imperfections of either character, nature, or essence. The testimony of the Son, regarding His Father, is that He is perfect and holy and righteous in every way whatsoever, and there is absolutely no flaws, or imperfections, or sin, or unrighteousness, anywhere within Him. Simple enough to understand, but impossible to really grasp. By that I mean that we can readily understand the meaning of the words, but we just can’t even begin to imagine how it’s really possible for such an entity to actually exist.

And John wasn’t speaking of relative righteousness, whereby God is compared to the rest of the field and found superior to all of them. We’re speaking of absolutes. The Son’s testimony is that His Father is absolutely flawless perfection of righteousness, holiness, integrity and essence. Now this isn’t a surprise to us who know God, and have received His gracious gift of regenerating faith (Eph 2:8-9) but we don’t often speak of the significance and the importance of God’s flawless character. Consider for a moment if you will what eternity would be like if God wasn’t absolutely perfect and holy and righteous and merciful and kind and loving. What if He was less than perfect?

What would we be looking forward to in His eternal kingdom; would it simply be more of the same relative righteousness that exists now on earth, but just a little bit better? There would be less sin than we have now, but no total escape from its residual damages and pollution. Would this be our heaven, just a slightly cleaned up earth? God forbid this should ever be! And forbidden it He has, for in Revelation chapter 21, the Lord speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, with a holy city that descends down from heaven to that new earth. And of that city He says, in verse 27, that nothing or no one that is defiled will ever enter that city, ever, ever, ever. Okay, so I’ve added some ever’s, but I want to make my point perfectly clear.

The promised eternal life that’s the gift of God to His chosen, is truly only as valuable as the quality of that life. Those who are in the Lake of Fire will plead and beg and weep for an end to their very existence, but to no avail. What they are said to have isn’t even called life, it’s described as a kind of conscious, never ending death. Many equate the death of the body with the total cessation of all existence, both soul and body. But the scriptures recognize no such thing. Every life ever conceived will continue forever in some state or condition for all eternity. Either in a condition of life in the kingdom of God, or a state of conscious death in the eternal Lake of Fire. There is no such thing as oblivion found anywhere in the scriptures.

So, what can we conclude? That if God were not absolutely perfect and holy and impervious to sin, then there would be no hope of escape from corruption, and pollution, and defilement ever to be found, anywhere in existence, for all eternity. And what we have now would be about the best we could ever hope for; and now let's talk about that very thing.

How does that sound to you? The fact is, that for the vast majority, even up to 90 percent according to John Calvin, and a host of others, this speaker being one of them; of those who openly profess Christ, and count themselves as Christians, that's exactly the heaven they want. That's their dream come true. A heaven where sin is still allowed just a little bit, but kept under control. Just enough to still have fun, but not enough to cause any serious harm. That's the cultural Christian's paradise. The heaven hoped for by the vast majority of good and regular church going folks. In fact, a heaven that's honestly totally free from sin scares the hell out of them, and they want to prolong their time here on earth as long as humanly possible before they're subjected to such a boring, even frightening place as that. They sing about, and talk about a heaven that actually scares them to death. The truth is, If it weren't for the fire, they'd prefer the alternative place, where they'd be more comfortable. Now certainly few, if any, would come right out and say this openly, but you tell me, am I exaggerating, or is this an honest assessment of the prevailing heart attitude of the ordinary members in the churches?

In the opening introduction to this epistle, I said that 1st John comes very close to being a bona fide litmus test of true regeneration. And this is one of those places. If you are one of those who is frightened by a place of perfect righteousness and holiness, and fear that you just might not fit in there, then there's definitely a reason for serious concern. Now I'm not as old as John was, and I'm certainly not someone of authority, but I join with the Apostles John and Paul in the heartfelt appeal to the members of the churches to examine yourselves honestly to see if you are truly in the faith. (2Co 13:5) John's epistle begs the reader to consider their condition, and make an assessment of their actions and heart attitudes. The supernatural work of God called regeneration means, among other things, that one's deepest longings and desires have been changed by an outside power. Where there once was a heartfelt desire for sin and the ways of the world, there has now been a radical and unmistakable change of heart, and that which was previously desirable is now abhorrent and shameful to the heart. (Rom 6:21) And those things of righteousness that were once of no value, are now the highest and greatest aspirations, for which one longs and seeks with earnest expectation. (Rom 6:17-18, 22)

If this doesn't really describe your heart's desires then you must not ignore it beloved, because something is desperately and seriously wrong. If you're one of that 90 percent going to church every Sunday, but knowing full well that you've never really experienced this massive change of heart, then you've probably concluded that it isn't even real, and everyone else is doing the same thing you are, just pretending to understand it. And you know full well that you don't really long, with earnest expectation, to be freed from this world and its pleasures of sin. If this is your situation then, firstly, you're not alone, and you're not an anomaly, you're actually among the great majority of nice church going people.

And secondly, it isn't simply because you haven't quite figured out the secret to contentment that others claim to have experienced. I said already, this change of heart is solely the result of a gift of God, given at His discretion. But, the scriptures also state that none who earnestly seek this gift of faith, and the repentance that it enjoins, and asks the Lord for it, will be turned away. Everyone wants their sins to be forgiven, and no one wants to be cast into hell for eternity, and many are those who ask for these, but to no avail. The heart that is truly being drawn by God (Jn 6:37, 44, 65) will plead to Him for a real change of nature, and a heartfelt repentance from sin, not just a reprieve of sentence. (Pardon)

To make it as clear as I know how, if you don't truly desire holiness and righteousness, and hunger and thirst for it with eager anticipation, then you don't need some kind of formula, or more teaching, you need the gracious gift of God that infuses faith and real repentance, and that is what you must confess you lack, and plead with Him to grant you by His mercy and His grace. And if He does, then you will be fully responsible for what you do with this gift, and how you nurture it and bring it to maturity, and use it for His glorification rather than your own satisfaction. (1Co 3:10-15; 2Co 5:10)

But no one does this solely by their own force of will. The popular decisional regeneration concept is a human invention that doesn't exist. It is first and foremost a unilateral gift of God, then it's transmitted and implemented by an act of the Holy Spirit, working upon the will of man to produce the condition of voluntary compliance, whereby he pleads to God for that gift of repentance and saving faith. (Phi 2:13)

The short version - you can't make it happen all by yourself. If it's lacking, you must confess it and plead to God for that regeneration of soul and spirit that changes your priorities and heart attitudes. Please don't think this is just some kind of everyday hype, this is a matter of life and death, and must be recognized as such, or the consequences will be dire and irrevocable.

In my introduction I also said that God will not have anyone in His eternal kingdom of righteousness that doesn't want to be there. If you aren't absolutely sure that's where you want to be, then you can be absolutely sure that it isn't where He wants you to be either. The one gift of God that makes every other gift have value, is the gift of righteousness. Many wonderful gifts await the children of God (1Co 2:9) some of which we can't even imagine, but remove this singular gift and the whole concept of heaven completely collapses. I don't know why we don't hear this preached more often than we do, unless it's because the churches are so full of unregenerate members that we're uncomfortable speaking of such matters. Not to mention that the speakers and leaders are all too often among that group themselves.

But the earnest heartfelt desire for righteousness, and an understanding and appreciation of its value, that cannot be attained in this world, nor while still in this contaminated body, is a non-negotiable requisite for acceptance into that kingdom where perfection awaits, and sin is forever banned. So why doesn't God give this gift to everybody? Because He requires us to come to the understanding of its value, and the certainty of our desire for it, before its granted. In fact, I've often suggested that this is among the main reasons for the fall of mankind and his intentionally unwinnable struggles during this lifetime, to learn first hand the unavoidable ravages of sin, and the incalculable value of God's gift of holy righteousness. It would be a tragedy to bestow such a priceless gift to a humanity that didn't even comprehend its value.

This heart attitude of exuberance for righteousness and abhorrence of sin cannot be absent if regeneration is present. Because these are the very base elements of regeneration. Just like there cannot be water where there is no hydrogen nor oxygen. I said in the beginning that 1st John was a book of blacks and whites, with little middle ground, and so it proves to be. To the truly born again, it will be a refreshing aroma of life, affirming those things that are in the heart's of the chosen, but to the many who are misinformed, it will be a strong aroma of doom, and probably a bit insulting, because John doesn't pull his punches in this epistle. And it only gets worse as he goes along. No one who has read 1st John has any excuses of ignorance as to what are the characteristics of regeneration and genuine Christian faith. And anyone who hears, and then ignores these things, does so at their own sure and certain peril.

But John isn't trying to doom anybody, he's appealing to them as a father to his beloved children to take heed of those precious truths of the gospel. To carefully examine ourselves, and then to make any corrections in our beliefs and practices that we need to make to remain faithful to the teachings. And anything that is beyond our own capability we are to confess to God, and humbly and contritely petition Him for the means of correction. But to ignore a warning, for whatever the reason, is just plain foolish, so let us hear John's appeals, and really take them to heart, as we work our way through the rest of this epistle.

Now before I conclude this lesson, which might be a little shorter than usual, I'm going to give you just a tiny little shade of gray, because that's what John does. We've spoken in absolutes, and those absolutes are true, but at the same time we also know that mankind is pretty much incapable of functioning entirely in a realm of absolutes, so, while it's completely true that everyone who inherits the righteous kingdom of God must desire perfect righteousness, it's also true that some won't rightly understand what this means, because periodic doubts and uncertainties are a part of the human psyche. And because the desires of our flesh are constantly warring with the desires of our spirit's, so we're sometimes unclear where we actually stand on an issue.

So, while the absolutes are true, it's also possible to occasionally mis-diagnose our condition through a lack of proper understanding. But this is the extreme exception, and not the rule. For the most part we do rightly understand our own condition and values, and are fully responsible for our resultant actions, or lack thereof. Therefore, It is very dangerous to consider oneself an exception when we realize that we don't conform to the scriptural model. If we realize that we don't really fit the biblical description of a regenerate Christian, hungering and thirsting for righteousness and total escape from sin and temptations, then we most certainly better confess that to God and beg Him for correction before we depart this

earthly realm.

Conclusion:

In this lesson we've considered the first 5 verses of chapter 1, and we've titled them "God's Message to Us" And his message is: that He is absolutely righteous and holy, and in Him there is no darkness at all. We pondered the ramifications of that statement, and sought to search out the treasures that it contains. We came to see that this statement about the character of God is the very foundation upon which all His promises rest. Holy righteousness is the defining characteristic of the God that we have the privilege to know and worship and serve. Within that definition resides all the other attributes comfortably filling out the definition. He is powerful, and He is wise, and He is merciful, and He is forgiving. He is impervious to temptations, He is incapable of lying, and He is ever faithful to His beloved children.

Then we went on to ponder the ramifications of His righteousness in so far as it directly effects us, and our eternal situation. But where the real meat of the lesson came to the front was in our discussion of just how do we ourselves relate to perfect righteousness. Do we really want it, or do we just want it in a measured quantity. Like Lot's wife, do we still have a small residual affection for the lust of the flesh that makes us want to glance back with fondness? Like Lot's wife, if we do then we won't escape the judgement anymore than she did, and this was recorded as a warning to all who think they can fondly embrace just a little sin and still avoid the wrath.

I don't remember how it goes, but there was a joke going around a former church that I attended, and I heard it at more than one of them, that ends up with the moral being that everyone wants to go to heaven eventually, but nobody seems to want to go right now. Well if someone asked you if you wished to win the lotto, would you say sure, but just not now, I'd rather wait a few years? Some might argue that this isn't a fair comparison, and maybe it's not, but it sure does beg the question as to just how genuine are the multitude of professing believers who say they are eagerly awaiting that blessed hope of the return of Messiah. It would seem that most professing Christians would rather win the lotto than see the Lord Jesus return to earth and establish His kingdom. If you were Jesus, what would you conclude about the heart condition of your beloved fiancee, who'd rather be wealthy than wedded?

Now, to close in the same spirit that John wrote to his fellow Christian brethren, whom he addressed as his beloved children, the time is getting very short indeed, and any moment could be the last moment we spend on this earth. So he exhorts us unto righteousness of character and behaviors, and to display a love for our brethren that rightly demonstrates a regenerated soul, that has been freed from its slavery to sin, and purchased at great price into an ownership of righteousness.

Oh dear Lord, we ask You to grant us a pure heart, and a sincere desire for your righteousness and holiness. To You alone be glory and honor and praise, both now and for evermore. Amen.

Narrow Gate Baptist Church, Miami

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