

Study 3: 1st John Chapter 2

Introduction

John addresses some of the problems caused by the Gnostic teachers in the second chapter. Christians have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and it is only by remaining steadfast in that relationship that we have God's assurance. This is in direct contrast to the false teachers, who deliberately set out to deceive.

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When people we know say one thing, and do the opposite, then which of these things reveals their true identity? How does this relate to what John says in the chapter?

What does it mean to "walk as He walked"? What are the practical ways that we can do this?

John describes some who are "children", some who are "young men", and some who are "fathers". Where are you on this scale in developing your faith in God? How can you help other people to also develop their faith in God?

Notes for study 3: 1st John Chapter 2

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Introduction

In contrast to the previous discussion on dealing with sin, John gives us instruction to avoid sin "...*My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin...*" (1:2:1 NKJV). We must not conclude that sin is inevitable and acceptable, but rather that we should continually fight against it. Sin offends God, and we – who belong to Him – must not tolerate such offensive behaviour in our lives. Nevertheless, there are times when we do sin, and John provides an assurance "...*But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One...*" (1:2:1 NIV).

There is no question at all in his mind that sin and obedience to God are irreconcilable. Sin is the enemy. It removes the believer from the light, prevents fellowship with God, and destroys fellowship with the children of light. The principle of sin as the power of darkness must be excluded from the believer's life, and individual acts of sin must be resisted. Where failure occurs, the sin must be confessed before the body and the Lord and then abandoned. And always the intent of the believer remains the same--not to commit sin! (NIVBC)

Jesus is our advocate with the Father. He has been through all of the (types) of trials and struggles that we face in our lives, and He makes intercession for us, and *speaks in our defense* to God. But more than just providing our defense, Jesus actually paid the price for our sins. "...*And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world...*" (1:2:2 NKJV). Jesus paid the price. He is the *propitiation* – the appeasement (the atoning sacrifice NIV) – for our sins. Our advocate does not maintain our innocence, but rather confesses our guilt, and then paid the price of that guilt Himself. John concludes that Christ's sacrifice is not only *sufficient* for all – *also for the whole world* – but is *necessary* for all!

Obeying God

John directs his comments towards the false teachers, and uses the description "He who says ..." three times (vs 4;6;9). In contrast to the Gnostics – who claimed enlightenment, but didn't put their faith in God into practice – the christian is exhorted to follow God faithfully. "...*Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments...*" (1:2:3 NKJV). The true test of our faith is demonstrated in obedience. John uses the conditional statement **If** we keep His commandments, **then** it is evident that we really belong to God.

The exact opposite is true of the Gnostics "...*He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him...*" (1:2:4 NKJV). They were professing to belong to God, but by their actions they denied Him. John makes the contrast "...*But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him...*" (1:2:5 NKJV). True knowledge does not come from speculation (as the Gnostics were practicing) but from the application of obedience to God by doing what He says and keeping His commandments. Neither should we reduce our religion to keeping and practicing a series of ordinances (for that is exactly what many of the Jews did). True religion comes from a heart that is motivated towards God by love, and responds in obedience to the things that God says.

The second statement directed towards the Gnostics follows: "...*He who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk just as He walked...*" (1:2:6 NKJV). This is not to say that we need to go to Palestine and walk through the streets of Jerusalem, or the regions of Galilee. The Gnostics

(apparently) claimed some sort of special experience that helped them on their way to enlightenment. John points them back to the experiences of Jesus. If we are to have a relationship with God, then we need to behave – live – the way that God would have us to do. Jesus was the perfect example of how we ought to live our lives, and one that as Christians, we need to follow!

John makes what is almost a perplexing statement “...*Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard.* ⁸ *Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining...*” (1:2:7-8 NIV). The command in itself is not new – it goes back to the beginning, and is really something that they always ought to have been doing. But, its newness is in the fulfilment of Jesus as the light.

It is possible that the Gnostics were criticising John and claiming that he was introducing “new doctrines”, and hence his claim and assertion that what he proclaims is what has in fact always been true, but comes from Jesus’ instruction (Jn 15:12).

The third assertion that John makes against the Gnostics is “...*He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now...*” (1:2:9 NKJV). This follows on from the previous discussion, that we show our love true for God in how we relate to our brethren. John deals with this again later in the letter (1:4:20), where he points out that we cannot claim to love God who we have seen, but hate our brethren (with whom we will share eternity), when we know them personally. It is like light and darkness, which can’t co-exist! In contrast, “...*He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no stumbling for him...*” (1:2:10 NKJV). John is concerned with our actions – putting our faith into practice – not in claims (such as the Gnostics were apparently making). The reverse is true, “...*He who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes...*” (1:2:11 NKJV). This person has *night blindness*, and has no idea where he is, or what he is doing.

Reasons for Writing

John gives (a somewhat repetitive) list of the reasons that he is writing – generally to encourage the brethren to go on to faithfulness: “...*I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.*¹³ *I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father.*¹⁴ *I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one...*” (1:2:12-14 NIV)

John changes tense “I write” and “I have written”, and then addresses three groups of people “children”, “fathers”, and “young men”. The first group have a total and basic faith, and can rest assured (in the most basic level of understanding) that their sins are forgiven. The second group are mature in the faith, and have a true, deep and meaningful relationship with God that has come about because of its trials and testing (Js 1:2-4). This group have also learned to control (although probably not totally conquered) sin in their lives. The third group have gone beyond a basic level of faith, and have struggled with and overcome Satan, and are growing towards maturity.

Prelude to the Warnings

The application of the exhortations that John has given (above) is about putting our faith into practice. “...*Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him...*” (1:2:15 NIV). He makes the contrast between where we put our trust (our faith). Do we put our faith, hope, and love in the temporal things of the earth, that will pass away, or do we put our total faith and trust in God? We cannot serve God and money.

He describes the “worldly things” by three parameters “...*For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world...*”

(1:2:16 NKJV). These three things are *exactly* in line with the temptations that Jesus faced (Lk 4:1-13), and we know that Jesus was tempted with the same types of temptation that we suffer (Heb 2:18; 4:15; 5:2).

We must put things in perspective, and remember that the things of the world are temporal “...*The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever...*” (1:2:17 NIV).

All the vanity of this evil world with its devices is passing away. It has already begun to putrefy. It is a corpse not yet buried. But the person who really does the will of God has the breath of eternal life. (NIVBC)

The Warnings

The first group of warnings concern denying Jesus, and have already been introduced (1:1:1-4). Those who deny Jesus, he literally calls *Antichrist* and he openly directs his comments to them, as well as exposing their methods. Following on from the temporal nature of the world, John reminds us that the world will pass away “...*Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour...*” (1:2:18 NIV).

Some might argue that it is (approximately) 2,000 years since John wrote the letter, and the end has not come yet. How could he claim that it is *the last hour*? But no man knows the time when Jesus will return. When He was on earth, not even Jesus knew (Mt 24:36; that is not to say that He doesn't know now). The point is, that the first century disciples *expected* that the Lord could return any time, and were *prepared* for when He did. The last days began after the cross (ie – the last dispensation – the christian dispensation) and it will end when Christ returns, and the (temporal) earth is burned up and done away with (2 Thess 1:7-11; 1 Thess 5:1-6; 2 Pet 3:5-11). So, the rise of false teachers confirms that the time is coming, and that we are in the last days. Satan is active, and using all of his powers to lead men away from God, and false teachers are one of his best weapons!

The false teachers that John describes, apparently had been members of the church, although they were not committed to Christ “...*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us...*” (1:2:19 NKJV). He obviously has some specific people in mind, and after attempting to infiltrate the church with their false teaching, they had left. Such a situation leaves a nasty taste in the mouths of those that are left, and leaves them with a deflated feeling. It is (in part) to address this situation that John writes the letter.

The departure of the opponents may have had a greater effect on the congregation than the reason for it. The early church obviously had severe debates, with significant differences of opinion being expressed. Yet as far as we know, no one thought that "separation from the congregation" was an option for anyone professing faith in Jesus. Departure, like Judas's going out from the community of disciples, pointed to betrayal, denial of faith, and separation from God's grace. That is why John acknowledges that those false teachers, whom he now designates as antichrists, had been regular members of the congregation. "They went out from us," he says, but hastens to add, "they did not really belong to us." Like Judas, they had been nominal members of the community and had never truly shared its fellowship (NIVBC).

The christians who were left must have been feeling deflated, and John assures them “...*But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth...*” (1:2:20 NIV). The Gnostics actually claimed an anointing, which gave them their enlightenment. John contrasts that claim with the anointing that the christians have, which comes from God. One would have to conclude that in the age of miracles, and in a location where they would have had contact with the apostles (Acts 8:18), that he has in mind the miraculous gifts. The miraculous gifts were used to

confirm the things that were taught (Mk 16:20; Heb 2:3-4), so that they could be assured of the truth that God had revealed. [We don't need the miraculous gifts any more, because God's truth is fully revealed in the New Testament, which was also confirmed by the same miraculous signs. Paul reminds us that these spiritual gifts were only temporal, and partial (1 Cor 13:8-13). For a fuller discussion, see Corinthians, studies 16,17, and 18].

John reinforces his message of encouragement "...I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth..." (1:2:21 NKJV). The false teachers are liars, and so their false teachings did not come – and, *cannot* come from God.

The Test of the False Teachers

The false teachers are pointed out by a rhetorical question "...Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist--he denies the Father and the Son..." (1:2:22 NIV). That is not to say that the only test of false teachers is whether they deny that Jesus is the Christ (and conversely, anyone who acknowledges that Jesus is the Christ is not a false teacher). The specific issue that the church was dealing with in this instance, was that the Gnostics were proclaiming themselves as self-righteous, and denying the deity of Jesus. It was an easy test to determine who they were. "...No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also..." (1:2:23 NIV). So, we cannot say that we have a relationship with God if we reject Jesus. In fact, Jesus said "...I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man comes to the Father, but by me..." (Jn 14:6). By this one statement, Jesus made every other religion false. There is no other way to God! The Gnostics who claimed to have an enlightened relationship with God, but denied Jesus deity just proved themselves false teachers.

John calls them back to the original teaching which was given by the apostles at the beginning "...See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is what he promised us--even eternal life..." (1:2:24-25 NIV). The exhortation to remain faithful to God, means to remain faithful to the teaching that they received (through the apostles – the apostle's doctrine (Acts 2:42)), and it comes with the promise and reward of eternal life.

The warnings are clear and specific, and pointed directly at the false teachers "...These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you..." (1:2:26 NKJV). John points out the motives of the false teachers. Not only was their teaching untrue and deceptive, but they were deliberately trying to lead the brethren away from the truth they had learned from the apostles. We need no other truth – that which was originally delivered is sufficient. "...As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit--just as it has taught you, remain in Him..." (1:2:27 NKJV). The apostles were guided by the Holy Spirit into all truth (Jn 16:13) – not some of it – not most of it – ALL of it. The same Holy Spirit teaches us (through the apostle's teaching), and taught the first century Christians (through God's revelation confirmed by the miraculous gifts) all things. We can have absolute confidence in the foundation of our faith when (and only when) we remain in the word – the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Final Exhortation (for now)

Whilst we need to be concerned about false teachers, we also need to be concerned about God's children remaining faithful. John addresses his final exhortation to the brethren "...And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming..." (1:2:28 NIV). We can be confident in facing Him when He returns, because we have walked with Him in our lives. The last verse of the chapter ends the previous thought and begins the next one "...If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him..." (1:2:29 NIV). The test of faithfulness is how we act in what we do. We demonstrate our faith by putting it into practice.