

Study 6: 1st John Chapter 5

Introduction

John concluded the first letter by tying together the themes that he has been discussing. The application comes from the total commitment that we make to God (agape love) and relating that to each other as we serve Him together.

Body of the Study

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Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read the second letter in preparation for the next study

Why is it that obedience to God's commands are not burdensome for Christians? If this is so, then why do we sometimes struggle in obeying them? What are some practical examples from your own life and experience? How do you reconcile what John says to your own life?

What are the most important teachings that we can derive from John's first letter?

How are we encouraged by John's assurances of our relationship with God?

Notes for study 6: 1st John Chapter 5

John concluded the first letter by tying together the themes that he has been discussing. The application comes from the total commitment that we make to God (agape love) and relating that to each other as we serve Him together.

Introduction

John continues the line of thought concerning the test of our relationship with God. He has previously provided two statements concerning our relationship with God, and here provides a third:

1:2:29	everyone who practices righteousness	is born of Him
1:4:7	everyone who loves	is born of God
1:5:1	whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ	is a child of God

The point that John makes is that we can't love the parent without loving their children, and the child that he has in mind is not Jesus, but we who are adopted as His sons (Gal 3:26-27).

Loving God, and Faith in Christ

"...Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well..." (1:5:1 NIV) John does not say that belief (faith) in Jesus is all that is required. He uses the perfect tense, which Roberts describes as

The perfect tense denotes an action begun or completed in the past, which continues up to the time of writing. John is actually saying then, that the one continuing to believe that Jesus is the Christ (having become a christian) continues to demonstrate by this that he has been begotten or is a child of God. Continuing in the status of a child of God depends on continued faith in Jesus¹.

So, John is describing our faith in the broad sense – faith and all that it encompasses, including our obedience to that faith.

The natural outcome of loving a parent is to love their children, and so it is with God *"...This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands..."* (1:5:2 NIV). The point that John is making throughout the letter is about developing our relationship with our brethren. The natural test would be to show our love for God by showing our love for His children. But in this place, John has it the other way around! His prime concern is about fellowship within the church. We are all in the same boat – sinners who don't deserve the salvation that God has graciously given us, and we all have God's love in common in our lives.

John then reinforces what he has just said *"...This is love for God: to obey his commands..."* (1:5:3 NIV). We cannot say that we love God, and *do nothing* – we must do what God says for us to do – carry out (or obey) His commands. Lest anyone think that that is an arduous task, he adds *"...and his commands are not burdensome..."* (1:5:3 NIV).

Those who keep God's commands can be seen if we look around us (he has only those in the church in mind – not those of the world), because these are the people who are successful at keeping God's commands *"...for everyone born of God overcomes the world..."* (1:5:4 NIV). The idea is *not* – in order to be acceptable to God – I must overcome sin – and if I don't control sin in my life – and do things that I ought not to do – then God will reject me. ***Rather***, the idea is that we have been justified (made right) by Jesus' sacrifice, and our faith in Him (and our obedience to God's commands). When we have this faith (the same kind of faith that Abraham had) then we will not walk in darkness, but walk in the light (1:1:5-7). *"...This is the victory that*

¹ Roberts, p.125

*has overcome the world, even our faith....” (1:5:4 NIV). The statement *overcome the world* does not mean that we are the boss and in charge of it! It means that we have escaped from the worldly practices, and live in a higher plain (2 Pet 2:20). John rounds the thought out with a question and a conclusion that leaves no doubt on the part of christians “... *Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God...*” (1:5:5 NIV).*

Spirit, Water, and Blood

Whilst the false teachers denied the deity of Jesus, John assures the readers of the historical accuracy of both the humanity and deity of Jesus. “...*This is the one who came by water and blood--Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood...*” (1:5:5 NIV). The reference to water and blood is the cause of some confusion and dissent. Some believe that it might refer to Jesus’ water baptism at the beginning of His ministry, and to His blood sacrifice at the end of His ministry. John records that when Jesus died, *a spear was thrust into His side, and blood and water flowed from it* (Jn 19:34).

The point that John is making, is that Jesus was the Christ come in the flesh (human form). He was both spiritual (and hence born of water when He was baptised), and physical. [Although we must not confuse Jesus’ water baptism with our water baptism. When we are baptised, we die to sin, are buried with Christ in baptism, and rise to walk in newness of life – the new birth. Jesus did not die to sin, (He had no sin), He was not buried with Himself (which would be absurd), and He did not need a new birth. His baptism symbolised His obedience to God, and the beginning of His ministry – a new beginning in His life]. Jesus’ physical (human) nature was shown in His death – which is typified by the blood sacrifice.

John draws together a third element, that of our spiritual nature, and draws the witness of the Holy Spirit to our attention “...*And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth...*” (1:5:6 NIV). Literally, *the Spirit is that which bears witness*, which must be read (at least initially) in the context of the miraculous manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the early church. As we have previously discussed, the Holy Spirit guided the apostles into ***all truth***, so that what they wrote in the New Testament is God’s complete and perfect revelation (Jn 16:13). So, when we read and understand the New Testament, we too receive the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

For a testimony to stand up, it cannot stand on one person (or witness) alone – it must be supported by other accounts (*by the testimony of two or three witnesses shall every word be established* – Dt 19:15; Mt 18:16; 2 Cor 13:1; Heb 10:28). The credibility of the deity and humanity of Jesus is supported with exactly the rigorous evidence required “...*For there are three that testify: ⁸ the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement...*” (1:5:7-8 NIV). Of course, the testimony of the apostles is not just given by one of them alone, but a consistent and coherent message is given by all of them, and also by the witnesses who saw the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor 15: 5-8). But we have a greater and more-sure testimony “...*We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son...*” (1:5:9 NIV). John does not leave us in any doubt as to what this testimony is “...*Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart...*” (1:5:10 NIV). It is the assurance that we have because of our faith in Him, and the love and trust that we have in our heart for God. The reverse situation is also true “...*Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son...*” (1:5:10 NIV). We have (extremely) solid evidence on which to base our belief in God. [Some people in the world regard christians as having “blind faith”. But that is not true. We have faith which is based on the confirmed evidence recorded in scripture, and which is supported by contemporary writings of the time. The evidence for Jesus far outweighs the evidence for the existence of the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar who lived around the same time, yet there are few (if any) in the world who would say that we only believe in Julius Caesar because of “blind faith”.

John provides a definitive statement, after establishing the credibility of the witnesses – just what is it that the witnesses have to say? “...*And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.* ¹² *He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life....*” (1:5:11-12 NIV).

Eternal life (which is nothing less than fellowship with the Father, with the Son, and with his people) is present in his Son. Those who have the Son have this life. Those who are without the Son are without life. It is not an idea or a system of belief or even a fact that is the ultimate object of faith; it is a Person. That Person is Jesus Christ. He is to live in us (3:24). His love is to abide and be made complete in us (4:12). We are to live in him (4:13). And this is life eternal. (NIVBC)

Conclusion to the Letter

John re-emphasises his purpose in writing the letter “...*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life....*” (1:5:13 NIV). His purpose is to give us assurance of our salvation, and to stir us up to continue to serve God. One part of the text missing from the NIV adds “...*and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God...*” (1:5:13 NKJV). [This is a textual issue, and is missing in some of the early texts. Some translations omit it because of this].

Having the assurance of our salvation, we can approach God with confidence rather than timidity (1:4:17-18) “...*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us...*” (1:5:14 NIV). We know that God hears our prayers, and that God answers our prayers. But the answer might not be the one that we want, but rather what God wants for us. Sometimes the answer is “yes”, sometimes it is “no”, and sometimes it is “not yet”. As Christians, we need to conform our will to God’s will, and the things that we ask for will be the things that will help accomplish His will. “...*And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him...*” (1:5:15 NIV).

Dealing with Sin within the Church

Following on from the confidence that we have in prayer, John addresses the ministry of prayer, and in particular how that relates to our concern for one another in the church.

If love requires the willingness to lay down one's life for a member of the community (3:16), then certainly it follows that if one sees a brother commit sin, such a person must intercede for him in prayer. Not to pray for him would be as much a betrayal of God's love as to withhold material aid from him (3:17). (NIVBC).

At first reading, John seems to conclude that there are degrees of sin, with some sins leading to (eternal) death, whilst others do not! This is not what he is saying (as we shall see later), but the focus of what he says has to do with the Christian community – the church – in dealing with sin. “...*If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death...*” (1:5:16 NIV). To understand what he is saying, we need to look at several other passages of scripture:

Gal 6:1 “...*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted....*” (Gal 6:1 NIV). We have a responsibility to our brethren to help them with their struggles in life. This is exactly consistent with what John has been saying about *agape* love, that we should have such great and deep care for one another.

Heb 6:4 “...*It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit,⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age,⁶ if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again*”

and subjecting him to public disgrace...” (Heb 6:4-6 NIV). The issue here is not God’s ability to forgive, but rather the willingness of those who commit the sins to repent.

Heb 10:26 “...*If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left,* ²⁷ *but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God...*” (Heb 10:26-27). These people were not caught up in “accidental” sin, but in “deliberate” sin. They knew what they were doing was wrong, but went ahead and did it anyway. They knew the hurt that it brought God, and the reason that they went on sinning was because they really hadn’t understood *agape* love, and become partakers of that love with God (partakers of the divine nature).

A similar situation had occurred amongst the churches in Asia Minor. The false teachers were not motivated to serve God, but themselves (1:2:26), and (probably after being rebuked for their false teaching) they had not repented, but left (1:2:19).

It should be noted that John does not use the definite article in either case when he refers to sin in 1:5:16, and so the generic case is what he has in mind. So, the passage is **not** “*a sin unto death and a sin not unto death*” but rather “*there is sin unto death and sin not unto death*”. To clarify the matter, John is not saying that there are some sins that we can overlook, and some sins that we can’t! To draw a parallel, it is like an illness – there are some illnesses from which we can expect to recover – and there are some which are terminal (unto death).

So, the idea that John brings out is that some of the brothers are sinning, and need to be brought back to repentance, whilst some of them are so encompassed in sin, and have progressed so far away from God that there is no possibility of bringing them back to repentance. John does not forbid us from praying for them, but he recognises that it is unlikely to achieve anything. “...*There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that...*” (1:5:16 NIV).

Lest we should think that there are degrees of sin, and that some sin does not require repentance, he adds “...*All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death...*” (1:5:17 NIV).

Closing Thoughts

The letter concludes with John summarising three characteristics that the Christians have against the false teachers. These are not new thoughts, but ones that he has already developed in the letter:

1. “...*We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him...*” (1:5:18 NIV)
2. “...*We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one...*” (1:5:19 NIV)
3. “...*We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true...*” (1:5:20 NIV)

The final point is the conclusion regarding the false teachers who denied Jesus. Jesus is true, the record of the apostles is true, the disciples are true, and the Gnostics are false. “...*And we are in him who is true--even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life....*” (1:5:20 NIV)

With a final exhortation, John closes the letter with an affectionate instruction to the Christians “...*Little children, keep yourselves from idols...*” (1:5:21 NKJV). Whilst this might at first seem out of character with the letter (as idolatry has not been mentioned in the letter), it is the outcome of the false teaching that he has been addressing right through the letter. We either worship the true God, or we worship the false gods set up by men!