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Gospel

1 John 1:5–2:6

When I was in high school, our teachers and administrators organized a full week of events and activities designed to raise awareness about the dangers of drunk driving. One afternoon we were all dismissed from our normal classes so that we could participate in several activities to emphasize the dangers of driving drunk. The most interesting of these activities was the “drunk goggles.” These goggles had special lenses that impaired our spatial reasoning, making it difficult to judge the distance from us to the things around us. The goggles made it hard to walk and impossible to shoot a basketball successfully. We all took turns driving a car slowly through orange cones set up in the school’s parking lot. We laughed at how silly we all looked as we were unable to do very basic things while wearing these glasses.

Now, for the moment, set aside the question of whether the drunk goggles were actually teaching us how much fun it was to have our vision and spatial reasoning impaired. (The kids who seemed to enjoy the goggles most were the kids who used to brag on Monday mornings about how drunk they got over the weekends.) The important point for our purposes is that these goggles provide a picture of how sin affects our perception of reality. Sin distorts and twists our ability to see

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ourselves, others, and even God correctly. As long as we wear “sin goggles,” we will never see things as they truly are.

John writes in this next section to clarify our vision with the meaning and importance of the gospel. In other words, he writes to remove the sin goggles from our eyes. John focuses specifically on the ways that sin distorts our understanding of reality, and he reorients us to see accurately who God is, who we are, and what our sin has made us in the sight of God. Then, he corrects two extremes in the way we mistakenly try to deal with our sinfulness. Pay careful attention to this passage, because if we miss John’s message about the gospel, our journey as disciples of Jesus will stall out before we even get started.

GOD IS LIGHT

In 1 John 1:5, John writes:

And this is the message that we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and darkness is not in him, not at all.

John begins this passage about the gospel with such a seemingly simple statement that at first we are tempted to read over it quickly to get to something a little more thought-provoking. John, though, is a master of deceptively simple language that the smallest child can understand at once and that a great theologian can spend a lifetime pondering.

The meaning of this sentence turns largely on the meaning of a single word that John uses here in verse 5. When he says, “And this is the *message* that we have heard from him and proclaim to you,” he is using the Greek word *angellia*, a word that means “message” or “news.” If you add to this word the prefix *eu-*, which means “good,” you get *euangellion*, or “good news,” and that word for “good news” is the word our English Bibles frequently translate as “gospel.”

So, in 1 John 1:5, John is giving us news, but it is not good

news. In fact, the news John gives us is actually very bad news, but more on that in a moment. This is the news that John gives to us: “God is light, and darkness is not in him, not at all.” Literally, John is using a double negative to convey the strength of what he is saying: God is light, and in him is *no* darkness—*none* at all.

Now, why should we think the message that God is light is bad news? After all, who would ever want to serve and worship a god in whom there was darkness? That is, why would we prefer a god who was cruel, hateful, and evil? Shouldn’t we be thrilled that God’s character is light (kindness, love, and goodness) so that in him there is not one speck of darkness whatsoever?

Taken by itself, it is a very good thing that God is light, and that in him there is no darkness at all. The problem, then, is not with God but with *us* and with our own relationship to this God-who-is-light. You see, if God is light, then he cannot tolerate the darkness in which *we* live. God’s holiness is not the problem. Our sinfulness is the problem.

Here’s the point: If God is light, but we walk in darkness, then we cannot have any commonality (fellowship) with God. And, if we can have no commonality with God, then we have no hope in this life or the next. This news means that we are cut off forever from the God-who-is-light. John’s message is bad news indeed.

But before moving on to other news—good news—John insists that we begin here, right at this point. John wants us to pause at this verse and think about the darkness in our lives, as compared to the perfection of God’s light. He wants us to come fully to terms with our own sin, our guilt, and our hopelessness—the bad news—before he tells us the rest of the story of what God has done to rescue us from our darkness. You see, we cannot recognize the gospel as good news unless we recognize just how bad our condition is.

So, before we move on in this chapter, ask yourself whether you have genuinely come to recognize your need

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of Jesus. Have you fully appreciated the radiant, blazing holiness of God, and have you identified the darkness of your own guilt as you stand before him? Do you realize that you actually deserve God's holy wrath against your sin? Have you completely despaired of your own ability to stand confidently before God on the Day of Judgment?

Or, are you wearing sin goggles that make it impossible to see the reality of your darkness in contrast to the God-who-is-light, in whom there is not a speck of darkness whatsoever?

If you do not acknowledge your darkness, then you do not yet understand the nature of Christian discipleship. Following Jesus requires us to acknowledge and confess our sins before God, and until we stand fully exposed in the light of God's holiness and recognize how far short of the glory of God we fall, we cannot begin down the path of the gospel. Meditate on 1 John 1:5 and pray that God would give you eyes to see the light of his holiness and the darkness of your sin.

But if you do recognize your desperate need for salvation, then you are exactly where you need to be for now. Keep reading. John has better news coming.

REFORMING THE SPEECH OF LEGALISTIC PHARISEES (LIKE ME)

If 1 John 1:5 is the bad news of Christianity, then John turns in the next few verses toward announcing the good news of Christianity, but he does so by challenging those who continue to deny their need for salvation. John writes:

⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him but we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light just as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, faithful he is and just, that he will forgive us *our* sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we

make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:6–10)

THE LEGALIST LIE

Notice in these verses that John addresses the speech of those who say they have no sin (and, therefore, no need for salvation) three times:

1:6: If we say that we have fellowship with him [a relationship that requires sinlessness, since God himself is light] but we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

1:8: If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

1:10: If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Those who claim to be sinless deny the truth about themselves, and such a lie becomes an expanding deception. First, John explains that we simply “lie and do not practice the truth” (1:6). Second, we begin to “deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1:8). Take special note of verse 8: at some point, we become so skilled at lying about our sin that we deceive even ourselves! Third (and worst of all), we become so deluded by our own sin that we actually go so far as to accuse God of lying about our sin in the first place so that “we make him a liar,” as though God were a corrupt judge (1:10).

So, the more we say we do not have sin, the more our lies get out of hand. Ultimately, if we continue to lie about having no sin in our lives, we come to the point where we will stop at nothing—not even outright blasphemy against God himself—to uphold our deceit.

In this passage, John is fighting the same battle Jesus did against the Pharisees (the religious leaders of the day): legalism. Legalism is the attempt to justify ourselves before God (and other people) by claiming to have done everything required of us—in other words, by claiming to have kept the law perfectly. Legalism is a kind of spiritual one-upmanship,

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so it creates self-righteousness and pride in our hearts as we boast about how much better we have obeyed the law (whether God's law, our own, or someone else's) compared to everyone else.

The truth, though, is that all of us have sinned. When we claim to be without sin, we deceive others and even ourselves. This is exactly what the Pharisees did by boasting in their ability to keep God's commandments. When they were able to keep the law (at least, according to their own standards of obedience), they made a big show of doing so, demonstrating to everyone around them just how holy and righteous they were. But whenever they were not able to keep the law, they hid their failures from public view and justified their lapses in their own minds so that they could continue thinking of themselves as better than everyone else.

To keep us from following in their footsteps, Jesus gave this surprising warning:

¹⁹Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:19–20)

Jesus doesn't oppose legalism because he wants to set the bar lower but because he wants to set the bar higher, at the level of absolute, perfect obedience. If God is light, and if in him there is no darkness whatsoever, even the smallest faltering in our lives completely disqualifies us from enjoying the presence of God in eternity. If our righteousness does not infinitely exceed even the most righteous people on the planet, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

But additionally, Jesus opposed legalism because efforts to justify ourselves by keeping God's law undermine the whole purpose that God gave the law in the first place. God did not

give the law so that we could spend our lifetimes showing others just what good people we are, and God especially did not give his laws as weapons to prove our superiority over others.

Instead, God gave us his law to teach us to love him and to love other people. When someone asked Jesus about the most important commandment, Jesus was very clear:

³⁷And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:37–40)

The two commandments to love God and to love people summarize the purpose and intent of the entire law. By definition, you cannot fulfill the law when you use it to exalt yourself and to belittle others.

For the Pharisees, legalism caused them to look with contempt on everyone who was not as righteous as they were, and legalism eventually drove them to hate Jesus (the only man who was genuinely righteous) so much that they wrongfully demanded his execution. Even today, legalism continues to alienate us both from God and from other people.

THE GOSPEL FOR LEGALISTS

And yet, God shows mercy even to legalists. Just as Jesus extended the promises of the gospel to Pharisees like Nicodemus and Saul (who later became the Apostle Paul), so Jesus extends the promises of the gospel to self-righteous people like me and like you.

In 1 John 1:6–10, John carefully explains the gospel to legalists. He declares, You need to change your speech! Instead of saying that you are without sin (old speech), start to confess (new speech) the sin that you have: “If we confess our sins, faithful he is and just that he will forgive us our sins

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and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). Stop denying the truth, and start acknowledging the darkness in your life.

God is absolutely holy and righteous, so he does not allow us simply to ignore our sins. God would be unjust to turn a blind eye to our sin and allow injustice to remain in the world unchecked. So, instead of compounding our sin by lying about it, John tells us to confess our sins so that we can find forgiveness.

My own story is that of a reformed legalist. When I was growing up in the church, I always wanted to be known as “the good kid.” My whole identity was based around the false idea that I was better than everybody else. So, I have struggled my entire life with the temptation to hide my sin from others. I want people to think that I am without sin, no matter how much I have to lie to keep up that facade.

The good news of the gospel, however, cuts through all of my deception. If I cannot humble myself to acknowledge my sinfulness, I am not merely lying, but I am actually refusing the forgiveness, cleansing, and righteousness that is mine in Jesus Christ! May God have mercy on our prideful hearts, because it is only through humbly confessing our sins that God promises true righteousness as he washes us clean by the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ.

HOW CAN GOD BE FAITHFUL AND JUST?

Now, let’s pause for a moment. How can it be true that God will actually forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness as long as we simply confess to our sins? Justice never works that way. The child still gets punished when she confesses to her parents about breaking the china that she wasn’t supposed to touch. The criminal still goes to jail when he confesses to a burglary. Certainly, confession often lightens a punishment because no additional consequences for lying are added on top of the consequences for the crime itself, but justice always requires sin to be punished. On what basis,

then, can God forgive our sins?

When I was young, I memorized 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (ESV). From early on, this verse became an important part of my understanding of the gospel. God forgives us when we confess our sins to him.

Later, this verse took on new importance to me as I first began to study Greek in seminary and realized that our English translations have altered the word order. In the original language, John goes out of his way to emphasize God’s faithfulness to forgive us, while still affirming God’s righteousness, by writing, “Faithful he is and just.” There have been moments in my life when I have despaired over my sin and have drawn great comfort from God’s promise that he would be faithful to forgive me of my sin and to cleanse me of my unrighteousness.

Then, at some point along the way, I realized that I had always read right over the word *just*. The word *dikaios* is a Greek word that the English language translates into two words, depending on the context: “righteous” or “just.” We typically say that a person is righteous, while a thing (whether a decision, a system, a country, a religion, etc.) is just. In Greek, the one word *dikaios* covers that entire range of meaning. So, the point here in 1 John 1:9 is that God is not only faithful to forgive us and cleanse us but that he is also just/righteous to do so.

This gets us back to our dilemma. How can God possibly be just/righteous when he subverts justice by refusing to punish anyone who merely confesses their sins? If a human judge in a court regularly pardoned the guilty for any reason at all, we would rightly call that judge corrupt and unjust, no matter what their reasons were for doing so (personal ties, bribery, extortion). How can we call God just/righteous for doing the same thing?

John feels the weight of this problem himself. Remember he opens this section of his letter with the message he heard from Jesus himself: “God is light, and darkness is not in him, not at all.” Above all other considerations, God’s perfect, pure holiness and righteousness must never be compromised,

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because God is light. He simply cannot allow darkness of any kind into his presence.

So how can God be faithful to forgive us, and yet still remain just? How can God cleanse sinners who walk in darkness so that we can walk with him in the pure light? This is a big challenge: If God cannot be faithful to forgive, then there is no gospel. If God cannot be just when he forgives, then the gospel is no longer good news. Who would ever want to live eternally with a corrupt God?

God solved this dilemma at the cross. There, God's perfect faithfulness and perfect justice came together in a bleeding, dying man: God's own Son Jesus Christ. At the cross, God poured out his wrath for our sin, but he poured it out on Jesus instead of on us. In this way, absolute justice has already been served and God remains just/righteous when he forgives sinners. At the cross, Jesus died for us so that God can now be faithful to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness without betraying his perfect purity.

This is why John writes in verse 7, "But if we walk in the light just as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another *and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*" When we walk in the light (i.e., when we do not hide our sin but bring it into God's holy light through confession), God forgives us and cleanses us with the blood of Jesus.

I love this verse from John Newton's hymn "Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder":

Let us wonder; Grace and Justice
Join and point to mercy's store;
When through Grace in Christ our trust is,
Justice smiles and asks no more:
He Who washed us with His blood
Has secured our way to God.

Justice demands punishment for crime, while Grace longs to extend faithful forgiveness. While these two ought to oppose each other, they join together in urging us to look to Jesus, who secured our way to God with his own blood. He

who washed us with his blood has enabled God to be just/righteous and the justifier (the one who faithfully makes us righteous/justified) of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26).

That gospel is *good* news.

REFORMING THE LIVES OF LAWLESS LIBERTINES (LIKE ME)

Legalism, however, is not the only extreme error that people commit as they rebel against the gospel. In 1 John 2:1–6, John turns his attention away from the speech of pharisaical legalists, and he now targets the lives of lawless libertines.¹ For the moment, we will skip 1 John 2:1–2 because it is helpful to figure out the problem John is addressing (verses 3–6) in order to understand the solution he offers (verses 1–2). So, in verses 3 to 6, John writes:

³And in this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴The one who says that “I have come to know him” but is not keeping his commandments, he is a liar and the truth is not in him. ⁵Whoever keeps his word, truly in this one the love of God has been perfected. In this we know that we are in him. ⁶The one who says he abides in him ought also to walk just as that one walked.

THE LIBERTINE LIE

The people John focuses on in this passage are those who claim to know God but who do not think that they are bound to keeping God’s commandments. The attitude of the libertines is the opposite of the attitude of the legalist. Where legalists want to prove their right standing with God on the basis of how well they keep the law, libertines insist that, since they know God, they are under no obligation to keep God’s commandments whatsoever! In 1 John 1:6–10, John confronted the lie of the legalists, and here, John unmasks the lie of the libertines.

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The problem with the libertines is often that they do not understand just how much God loves his own law. In fact, many libertines actually misuse New Testament discussions about the law by going so far as to suggest that the law itself is somehow bad. Certainly, efforts to justify ourselves by the law are bad, but God's law is perfectly good. Jesus was very clear: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). Even the Apostle Paul wrote, "Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully" (1 Timothy 1:8).

In fact, God's law is a perfect description of God's own character. So, if you want to know what God loves and what he hates, study the law. The Pharisees were dead wrong about how and why they should obey the law, but they were right to insist that God wanted his law to be taken seriously. They did not understand that our righteousness comes not by keeping the law but rather by faith in Jesus, whose blood cleanses us from unrighteousness and who himself fulfilled the law for us. We are righteous because Jesus was the perfect law-keeper who gives us his own righteousness through faith.

So, faith alone in Jesus alone is what saves us; however, saving faith is never alone. If we have indeed come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, our lives will also begin to bear the fruit of good works. We will still fail (continuing to need the blood of Jesus to cleanse us), and every bit of our obedience will happen by nothing less than the grace of God, but in saving us, God gives us new hearts that desire to obey him.

We will look at this subject more in the next chapter, but for now, remember what Jesus told us: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). We simply do not have the option of ignoring Jesus' commandments. If we do not keep his commandments, then we reveal that we do not really love him. John means it when he says, "The one who says he abides in him ought also to walk just as that one [i.e., Jesus] walked" (1 John 2:6).

Ultimately, legalists and libertines alike fundamentally misunderstand the gospel because both groups do not grasp the significance of 1 John 1:5: “And this is the message that we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and darkness is not in him, not at all.” If God is perfect, pure, holy light, in whom there is no darkness at all, then he hates when we lie about the presence of sin in our lives (legalists). But by the same token, God hates it when we refuse to obey what he has commanded us (libertines). John states plainly, “The one who says that ‘I have come to know him’ but is not keeping his commandments, he is a liar and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4). For the disciple of Jesus Christ, neither option is acceptable.

THE GOSPEL FOR LIBERTINES

It is important to see, though, that John’s message to libertines is not that they should swing the pendulum wildly back toward the law. Instead, John’s solution is to reorient us to the gospel. In verses 1 and 2, he writes:

¹My little children, I am writing these things to you in order that you might not sin. But if someone sins, we have an advocate toward [*pros*] the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous. ²And he is the propitiation concerning our sin, not concerning ours only, but also concerning the whole world.

One of the ways God uses the law is to show us our sin and the extent to which we fall short of the glory of God. Additionally, as we discussed earlier, God uses the law in the lives of believers to teach us about what he loves and what he hates so that we learn the character of God from the law. But the law is never the solution to our sinfulness—the law points us away from itself toward our solution.

To people whose lives are rotting away under sin, John counsels us to look not to the law but to our advocate, Jesus Christ the Righteous. As our righteous advocate, Jesus pleads on our behalf face-to-face [*pros*] with the Father, even as

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he calls us to deeper faith and obedience. John does not minimize the problem of sin—he is writing these things so that we may not sin!—but he points us to the gospel of Jesus Christ and not to the law as the solution.

The Scottish pastor Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813–43) affirmed this idea in a letter to George Shaw, written in 1840: “Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace and all for sinners, even the chief.”² Whether we struggle with self-righteous legalism or libertine antinomianism, following Jesus means learning to look toward Christ alone for our salvation through faith. The law cannot save us, but the law is still good, so we must never try to get rid of it completely. The only way we can navigate through the twin demons of legalism on the one side and libertinism on the other is through the gospel of Jesus Christ, our advocate, whose blood cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

The more we look to ourselves (whether to our own abilities to keep the law or to our own desires that run contrary to the law), the more quickly we abandon the path of following Jesus toward holiness. So, for every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ! The more we learn to enjoy the beauty of Christ through the eyes of faith, the more detestable our sin becomes to us, the more we cling to our advocate for righteousness, and the more we obey God’s commandments by the power of the gospel in our lives.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. John writes, “God is light, and darkness is not in him, not at all” (1 John 1:5). In what specific ways does that news confront what you think about yourself? How does that news confront the way you live your life or the way you approach God?
2. When you speak about your sin, what kinds of things do you say to minimize your sin in the eyes of others (legalist)?
3. In the way you live your life, how do you minimize the importance of the law (libertine)?
4. John writes, “faithful he is and just, that he will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Do you tend to downplay the faithful grace of God in the gospel, or the just righteousness of God in the gospel?

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Gregory the Great, *Moralia, or Commentary on the Book of the Blessed Job*, trans. James. J. O'Donnell, §4. <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/moralial.html>

CHAPTER 1: TRUTH (1 JOHN 1:1-4)

1. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 376.
2. Again, most translations use the word *with* in John 1:1, but the Greek word is actually *pros*, just like in 1 John 1:2.
3. George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 267.
4. Cyprian of Carthage, *The Lapsed; The Unity of the Catholic Church*, trans. Maurice Bévenot, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, no. 25 (New York: Newman Press, 1956), 48–49.

CHAPTER 2: GOSPEL (1 JOHN 1:5-2:6)

1. A libertine is the name given to Christians who sin freely because they over-emphasize Christian liberty. People who make this mistake are also called antinomians, from the two Greek words *anti* (in place of) and *nomos* (law).

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2. *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, ed. Andrew Bonar (London: Dundee, 1845), 254.

CHAPTER 3: GROWTH (1 JOHN 2:7-14)

1. See Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–34.
2. This outline is adapted from Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, New Testament*, vol. 2 (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1989), 485–91.
3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, vol. 22, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 181. See e.g., Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 417; Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*, 495.

CHAPTER 4: PERSEVERANCE (1 JOHN 2:15-27)

1. Augustine, “Sermon 335C: The Sermon of the Blessed Bishop Augustine on the Feast of a Martyr,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 59.
2. E.g., “pride in riches” (New Revised Standard Version), or “pride in possessions” (ESV).
3. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 426.
4. Thomas Chalmers, “Discourse IX. The Expulsive Power of a New Affection,” in *The Works of Thomas Chalmers*, vol. 6 (New York: Robert Carter, 1840), 209.
5. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 427.
6. Chalmers, “Discourse IX,” 209.

CHAPTER 5: HOPE (1 JOHN 2:28-3:10)

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.
2. 1 John 2:6, 10, 14, 17, 19, 24 (3x), 27 (2x), 28; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24 (2x); 4:12, 13, 15, 16.