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## Discipleship according to John

**S**o, what's next? Now that we have come to the end of our study on discipleship from the letters of John, where do we go from here? In this last chapter, let's look first at a brief recap of each of the sections of this book. If you have been reading this book a chapter at a time on your own or as a part of a Bible study, it will be helpful to review the entire book quickly.

Then we'll pull together the various sections of the book to see the unified, coherent message John has given us so that we can chart a clear course forward for our discipleship. By the grace of God, let us continue following Jesus all the days of our lives until the day he appears, when we will be like him because we will see him as he is.

### **TRUTH**

In the first four verses of 1 John, the apostle lays the foundation for Christianity: truth. To paraphrase what Paul writes, If Christianity isn't true, then we are the most pitiful people in the whole world (1 Corinthians 15:19).

But Christianity is true. The eternal, unshakable truth that has existed from the beginning in a face-to-face relationship with the Father was manifested in our midst—

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and this truth is a person. The truth of Christianity is not some abstract philosophical idea but the second person of the Trinity who took on human nature in our midst, Jesus Christ. And through Jesus, we have fellowship not only with God the Father but also with one another in the church that Jesus came to save.

### **GOSPEL**

In 1 John 1:5, John gives us a message—not a good message (not gospel), but a message that should cause sinful people like you and me to take notice: God is light, and darkness is not in him, not at all. John points our attention to the contrast between the blazing glory of God's pure light and the darkness in which we walk so that we can see that we are great sinners in need of a great Savior. John cuts through the lie of the legalists who say they are without sin, as well as the lie of the libertines who say they know God but do not keep God's commandments.

Instead, John calls us to new speech. He encourages us to confess our sins, trusting in God's promise that he will be faithful to forgive us. But how could a holy God—who-is-light (in whom there is no darkness at all!) forgive sinners? John tells us: God will forgive us because justice has already been served when Jesus shed his own blood at the cross as punishment for our sin. Today, we have an advocate who faces the Father, pleading with him on our behalf, Jesus Christ the Righteous.

That is the good news of the gospel.

### **GROWTH**

In 1 John 2:7–11, John begins to teach us the fruit of the gospel: growth. While the gospel offers free forgiveness to the worst sinners, the gospel also demands growth in our lives. Specifically, God desires that we should grow in our

love for one another. The commandment to love is not a new commandment but an old commandment from the beginning. At the same time, however, Jesus made the old commandment new by a new emphasis, a new example, and a new enabling through the power of the Holy Spirit. All of us, whether young Christians or old, are called to grow together in and through this gospel of grace.

### **PERSEVERANCE**

John did not write 1 John because he had nothing better to do. Instead, this letter is written as an urgent message to Christians on the front lines of spiritual warfare to bring us life-saving warnings about the enemy's movements. This world has real dangers that can destroy believers, and John wants to keep us from those dangers.

So, John cautions us against loving the world or the things in the world, and he urges us to instead be filled with the love of the Father. But, John only spends three verses warning us about the world. In 1 John 2:18–27, John then warns us about dangers from within the church. Antichrists will continue spreading their message denying that Jesus is the eternal Son of the Father, and John wants to ensure that our faith is not shaken. John also writes to assure us that we will persevere through this conflict by reminding us that we have the anointing of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us all things concerning the Son of God.

### **HOPE**

In 1 John 2:28–3:3, John insists on three truths: (1) now we are children of God; (2) we are not yet what we will be when Jesus appears, when we become like him because we will see him as he is; and (3) in the meantime, between the already and the not yet, we should purify ourselves as he is pure.

Then, in chapter 3, verses 4–10, John gives another warning: if we do not practice righteousness (i.e., purify

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ourselves by daily repenting from sin, believing the gospel, and seeking to obey Jesus in all we do by grace) but instead continue to practice unchecked, unrepentant, ongoing sin, then we know we are not yet children of God. Instead, John warns, that kind of lifestyle is a clear sign that we remain children of the devil.

### **RIGHTEOUSNESS**

John continues his thought in 1 John 3:11–24 by defining the exact difference between the children of God and the children of the devil: the children of God practice righteousness by loving other children of God, while the children of the devil follow in the footsteps of Cain by hating, and even murdering, the children of God. If we resemble Cain, then we are children of the devil who do not have eternal life abiding in us.

But on the other hand, John also explains that if we resemble Jesus in the way we love one another self-sacrificially (Jesus laid down his life for his people), then that love functions as evidence that we have passed over from death to life. When our hearts condemn us, this supernatural, righteousness-love helps to reassure our hearts before God.

### **DISCERNMENT**

After assuring us of our hope, John gives another warning in 1 John 4:1–6: we must test the spirits. All around us, supernatural forces have recruited people to serve as false prophets, spreading false messages wherever we go. Specifically, John writes, these false prophets try to cast doubt on the incarnation of Jesus. John had earlier written to warn us against the antichrists who tell us Jesus is not the eternal Son of God, and now John writes to warn us about the antichrists who tell us Jesus did not become a real human being.

John insists that the gospel is true only if Jesus was fully God and fully human—anything less, and Jesus would not be

able to save humankind. Whoever denies the doctrine of the incarnation is not from God but speaks from a spirit of error.

## **LOVE**

After a warning, John again urges us forward in love. In 1 John 4:7–21, John reveals that love is a theological issue by telling us first that God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God (4:15) and that God abides only in those who abide in love (4:16). Why? God's nature is love, and Jesus is by nature the Son of God. If you imagine a god who is not love, or a god whose son is not Jesus, you have created a false god in your mind.

Therefore, John urges us to believe upon Jesus and to love one another just as God has loved us. The apostle warns us that we cannot claim to love God if we do not love our fellow believers, for love is from God and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

## **FAITH**

In 1 John 5:1–12, John writes explicitly about the nature of our faith. First, he explains the origin of our faith: our faith is the result of the new birth God gives us by grace. We do not believe to be born again; we believe because we have been born again. Second, John characterizes our faith: our faith is nothing less than a victory of God over all the demonic powers in this world.

Third, and most important, John reveals the foundation of our faith: we believe because of the testimony the Spirit gives us, which is life itself. And furthermore, the testimony of life that the Spirit brings is nothing less than Jesus Christ himself in all his glory. “The one who has the Son has the life,” John writes, and “the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

## **PRAYER**

Next, John explains in 1 John 5:13–17 that this life in Jesus gives us confidence. Specifically, we have confidence in prayer, that God will answer whatever we ask of him when we ask according to his will. And even more specifically, John tells us we should exercise our confidence in prayer for the sake of prodigals who begin to depart from the faith. We have no promises concerning those who are sinning a sin leading toward death, but John urges us to love our prodigal brothers and sisters specifically by praying for those who are not yet too far gone.

## **ETERNAL LIFE**

Finally, John comes to the center of his message in 1 John 5:18–21. John tells us three things that we have come to know during our discipleship training, and he leaves us with a single exhortation. First, we have come to know that we cannot continue sinning if we have been born of God. Jesus, the Great Protector, ensures that the evil one cannot touch us. Second, we have come to know that even though we are of God, the whole world still lies in the power of the evil one. Finally, we have come to know that Jesus came and gave us understanding so that we may know him, for Jesus is the true God and eternal life.

Therefore, John writes, keep yourselves from idols. Do not stray into anything at all that might lead you away from Eternal Life himself, whose name is Jesus.

## **THE CASE STUDY OF THE ELECT LADY**

In 2 John, the apostle pulls together two strands of his teaching from 1 John to show their close connection: truth and love. Neither truth nor love can stand alone, but John shows that love does whatever it takes to pursue

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people in truth but that truth gives immovable guidelines and boundaries to protect love against the dangers of false teachers with their poisonous doctrine. In Jesus, both love and truth win.

Through this case study, John urges us never to allow our love to grow cold or to permit any compromise of the truth. If we pursue truth as a merely intellectual exercise, we miss the warm love of Christian fellowship, but if we allow false teachers in our midst, we poison ourselves with deadly teaching.

### **THE CASE STUDY OF GAIUS AND DIOTREPHES**

In 3 John, we see the practical side of John's discipleship training through the contrast of two men. In Gaius, we see Christian discipleship come to its full fruition, and in Diotrephes, we see the rotten fruit of a man who has fully rejected Jesus and sought only to put himself first. For Gaius, this looks like a man who completely loves Jesus and who gives generously of what he has to support those who are doing missions for the sake of the name of Jesus. For Diotrephes, however, we see a man who rejects all authority in order to establish his own, usurped power.

John therefore urges us not to imitate that which is evil but to imitate that which is good. We ought to give all of who we are for the glory of Jesus, as Gaius did, and we ought to take care never to pursue our own glory, as Diotrephes did.

### **DISCIPLESHIP ACCORDING TO JOHN**

So where do we go from here? Through the course of 1 John, the apostle teaches us that ongoing, lifelong discipleship means four things, whether we have only recently believed in Jesus for salvation or whether we can look back on decades of following Jesus.

**KNOW GOD**

First, John insists everywhere through his letter that we must make a lifelong habit of studying God—not as a student studying only enough to pass a test or as a researcher who cares only about his field because of the money it pays, but as a lover who desires to know everything she can about her beloved. Because God is infinite, we will never come to the end of everything there is to know about him. Eternity with God will not be boring repetition, but we will endlessly enjoy the inexhaustible beauty and glory of God.

In his attempt to capture the full magnitude of this beauty and glory, John opens his letter with a run-on sentence about the life that was manifested among us (1 John 1:1–3). He insists that the foundation of our faith is the fact that God is light, and darkness is not in him, not at all (1 John 1:5). John explains that the Father takes the treatment of his Son personally, so that we are not allowed to imagine a non-triune god (1 John 2:18–25). John shows that we know righteousness because God is righteous (1 John 3:7) and we know love because God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Then, John caps his letter by teaching us that to know Jesus is to have eternal life, because Jesus is true God and eternal life (1 John 5:12, 20).

In 2 John and 3 John, this theme of knowing God in truth comes to the forefront again. In 2 John, we find that in Jesus, truth wins (2 John 1:7–11). In 3 John, we see in Gaius a real-life example of what it looks like to pursue the truth with everything we have, and in Diotrephes's twisted desire to be first (3 John 1:9), we see a warning against embracing false teachers who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh (2 John 1:7).

Discipleship requires us to study God so that we can learn who he is. Remember that at the beginning of this book, we talked about the fact that the most basic definition of disciple is “learner” and that the most important learning is coming to know God himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This means we need to take every opportunity we can to

study God's word. God has revealed himself in and through his word, making it possible for us to come to know him by listening to what he has spoken. Because knowing God is both our most pressing need and our highest joy, the Bible is far more practical for us than we sometimes realize. Just as I cannot have a relationship with my wife (or, at least, not a good relationship with my wife) unless I listen to what she says, we also cannot have the kind of relationship with God that he wants for us unless we listen to what he has said.

With all the false messages the false prophets bombard us with every day (1 John 4:1), listening carefully to what God has actually told us is more important than ever. As disciples of Jesus, we need to take this calling seriously by making time daily to study God's word. One resource I have found particularly helpful to study the Bible is the Robert Murray M'Cheyne Bible Reading Plan, which was written by a Scottish pastor in the nineteenth century. The standard plan assigns you about four chapters of the Bible to read every day on four different tracks through the Bible. To begin, I would recommend reading only one or two of those tracks at a time.

To help in this, I would encourage you to sign up for a daily Bible study that I write on a passage from the plan at <https://freedailybiblestudy.com>. I am writing these daily meditations to help people to understand every portion of Scripture in the light of the whole story, and in the light of Jesus Christ. You can read the meditations on the blog, sign up to receive them daily by email, or subscribe to listen to the material by podcast. Every meditation will cover only one of the day's readings.

Even better, ask your friends or your small group to read the same plan as you so that you can enjoy fellowship with one another, as well as with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3). Together, you can share insights, ask questions, and pray through what you are learning about God with one another. By helping each other know God, we love one another just as God has loved us.

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### REPENT FROM SIN

Second, the more we study the blazing glory of God's light, we will inevitably recognize the stark contrast of our own sin. In fact, John writes, "If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Throughout 1 John, the apostle reminds us again and again of what the clear standards of God are, and he implicitly asks us to measure ourselves against those standards. Particularly, John tells us that love is the old commandment that was from the beginning (1 John 2:7, 3:11; 2 John 1:4–6) and that we must love one another, just as God has loved us (1 John 4:7).

So, John insists that part of discipleship means we recognize where we have fallen short of God's righteous requirement of love and confess that sin to God (1 John 1:9). God does not expect perfection from us, but God does call us to a lifestyle of repentance from sin—that is, a lifestyle of turning from sin and then toward God. This is what John means when he says that "everyone hoping in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:3). "Practicing righteousness" (1 John 3:7, 10) does not mean practicing perfection, but instead it means regularly turning from our sin, asking God to forgive us, and praying for God to continue giving us growth, transforming us bit by bit to be like Jesus.

Remember, it is the legalist lie to deny the presence of sin in our lives (1 John 1:6, 8, 10), and it is the libertine lie to reject our need to repent from sin (1 John 2:4). John pleads with us to swallow our pride, confess our sins, and entrust ourselves to the grace of the Lord Jesus. We cannot claim to be disciples unless we regularly repent from the ways we fall short of God's glory in sin.

### BELIEVE THE GOSPEL

Third, John always links repentance from sin with the promise of the gospel. When he insists that we confess our sins in 1 John 1:9, he declares that God is both faithful and just to

forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness by the blood of Jesus (1 John 1:7). When he acknowledges that all of us will sin in 1 John 2:1, he reminds us that “we have an advocate toward the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.” When he encourages us to continue purifying ourselves as God is pure, he reassures us of our current confidence and our future hope: “Beloved, now we are children of God, but it has not yet been manifested what we will be. We know that when he appears, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Then, when our hearts condemn us for our failures, John reassures us that God is greater than our hearts, because God knows both where we have been and where he is taking us (1 John 3:19–21). When we see brothers and sisters sliding into sin, John urges us to believe the gospel for them, praying that God would give life to prodigal believers (1 John 5:14–16). And to close his letter, John pleads with us that we would never, ever let the gospel of Jesus Christ slip out of our sight: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

Christian discipleship isn’t about good people flaunting their goodness in front of bad people with holier-than-thou self-righteousness. Christian discipleship isn’t about cleaning up your own life with new resolve to “do better next time.” And Christian discipleship isn’t about merely admiring Jesus as nothing more than a good teacher and a high moral example.

Christian discipleship is about broken, sinful, needy people openly acknowledging their inability to do anything good on their own but looking to Jesus by faith to forgive us our sins, to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, and to purify us as he is pure. Christian discipleship is about believing the gospel that one day Jesus will return and that when he appears we will be made like him, because we will see him as he is.

Brothers and sisters, believe the gospel. The gospel is Christianity 101, but we do not ever graduate to move beyond the gospel on to something else. The good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to destroy the works of the devil

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and to save sinners should never cease to humble us, convict us of our sin, lead us to repentance, draw us again to faith in Christ, and deepen our love for God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

As you study God daily, and whenever you come to recognize sin in your life, turn again and again and again and again to the hope you have in Christ, because Jesus is true God and eternal life. The one who has the Son has life through the gospel.

## LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Finally, John refuses to let us forget about God's commandment that we should love one another (1 John 2:7–11, 3:11, 3:23–24, 4:21, 5:2–3; 2 John 1:4–6). The gospel declares we are saved by faith alone, in Christ alone, through grace alone, but John also reminds us that saving faith is never alone. No one can fully counterfeit the kind of faith that has overcome the world because real, genuine, truth faith comes only from being born of God (1 John 5:4). And if we are born of God, John writes, then naturally we will also love one another (1 John 2:10–11, 3:10–15, 4:7–21; 2 John 1:4–6; 3 John 1:5–8); hatred for other believers, as John explains in each of these passages, is a sign that we have not yet been born of God. Again, it isn't that anyone will love their brothers and sisters perfectly (1 John 1:6, 8, 10) but that ongoing, unchecked, unrepentant lovelessness is not a possibility for anyone who has been born of God (1 John 3:4–15, 4:7–21; 3 John 1:11)

And John takes love seriously—he does not let us off easily here. John insists that the children of God must be willing to lay down their lives for one another (1 John 3:16), but for those of us who will never be asked to die in a literal sense for another believer, John gives us a blunt and challenging test: “But whoever has the livelihood of the world and sees his brother having need and closes his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John

3:17). In fact, in the measure that we serve one another, we serve God himself (3 John 1:6).

Here is what this means for our discipleship: Jesus died to make us part of his church, not for us to remain as isolated individuals. Remember that at the very beginning of this letter, John wrote, “what we have seen and heard, we bear witness also to you, that also you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write, that our joy may be filled” (1 John 1:3–4). John’s letter calls us to enjoy full fellowship with the church so that “if we walk in the light just as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one other and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). We are called to support and stand with one another—especially those who are called to special ministries for the sake of the name—so that we may all be considered “fellow-workers for the truth” (3 John 1:8).

Discipleship cannot happen outside the context of the church. We cannot really have Jesus while rejecting his church, because a core part of what it means to be a Christ follower is to enjoy fellowship in the community of other believers. Obedience to Jesus means sharing in one another’s joys and sorrows, serving one another whenever anyone has a need, sitting together regularly at the feet of Jesus to learn from his word, and comparing notes with one another about what our Lord is teaching us.

Joining a local church is not the process through which we receive eternal life—Jesus alone gives life through faith in his name (1 John 5:12–13). But, membership and active participation in the local church is the only way we can fulfill the commandment Jesus has given us from the beginning, that we should love one another (1 John 2:7, 3:11; 2 John 1:4–6). Why? Because love cannot happen in the abstract. Love can only happen when we care for the brothers and sisters whom we actually see in our midst (1 John 4:20; 3 John 1:5–8).

Little children, let us not love in word or in tongue but in work and in truth.

**A PRIMER ON DISCIPLESHIP**

And now we come to the end of John's primer on discipleship. Brothers and sisters, be encouraged—the day is coming when Jesus will appear, and we will be like him, for we will see him as he is! We have nothing to fear, for the perfect love of God we have in Christ through the anointing of the Holy Spirit drives out fear.

So as we wait for his coming, let us practice righteousness as he is righteous. Seek to know God through his word. Repent from your sins. Believe the gospel. Love one another, just as God has loved you. These things are simple enough on paper, but we have a lifetime's worth of growth ahead of us as we persevere forward, until Jesus returns and completes the good work he has begun in us.

In the meantime, do not love the world or the things of the world. Beware the antichrists who preach to you that Jesus is not the Son of God, as well as the false prophets who try to undercut the full humanity of Jesus. For we know the Son of God came, and he has given to us understanding so that we know the True One, and we are in the True One, in his Son Jesus Christ. This one is true God and eternal life.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols.