

That You May Know

A PRIMER ON CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

By Jacob D. Gerber

19Baskets

That You May Know: A Primer on Christian Discipleship

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Foreword

Whether you are a new believer or a seasoned saint, you will benefit greatly from reading this book. It does exactly what a Bible commentary should do—enlighten, encourage, and enrich—and it does so in a manner that is clear, wise, and practical.

I have heard the author preach many times and have appreciated the way he stays on track and avoids detours. His approach is practical, and he does not waste words or ignore difficulties. He explains God's truth clearly and applies the truth courageously.

I have been in ministry over sixty years, and I think I am correct in saying that Christians today desperately need the truths found in John's Epistles. John's teaching on truth, love, spiritual growth, prayer, and faith is exactly what we need. We have won many converts but have not made many disciples, and some of the disciples we have mentored have strayed from following the Master. If God's people take to heart the truths taught in First, Second, and Third John and obey them, it could mark the beginning of the spiritual awakening that many of us have been asking God to send.

As you read with your heart open to the Lord, He will speak to you through what His servant has written; and that could be the beginning of a new spiritual adventure for you.

Warren W. Wiersbe

Former Pastor – The Moody Church, Chicago

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Thank you to my parents who have supported me in so many ways for a long time, especially in my work and ministry. Your encouragement has been invaluable for my entire life, so thank you for everything you did for me and gave to me along the way. There is no way that I would be where I am without you.

Thank you to the team from Lincoln Berean College Group with whom I studied 1 John for the first time back in 2005. My love for the letters of John began in our meetings at the Mill in downtown Lincoln, so thank you to Matt and Renee Meyer, Andrew Osten, Dan Brown, and Ben Zuehlke. The work we did in writing a Bible study for Real Time are some of my fondest memories from college.

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Thank you to my editor, Renae Morehead, who so carefully combed through my manuscript to raise helpful questions, smooth out awkward phrases, align styles, and cut out the absurd amount of italics I wanted to use. Every time I accepted your suggested changes, I could feel my book becoming that much better because of your help. I cannot thank you enough for your work.

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Thank you to Lisa Moore for using your incredible design talents to put a top-notch cover on this book. People will always judge books by their covers, so thank you for making a cover that I can be proud of.

Finally, I want to thank everyone who contributed to my Kickstarter campaign to raise money for editing, designing, and laying out the text of this book. I would not have had the resources to get this book finished apart from your generous support, so thank you to the following people: Terry and Becky Gerber, the Price-Williams family, Ryan and Leisha Pitkin, Rev. Anthony and Stacy Gerber, Brad and Nancy

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A Note on Bible Translations in This Book

Unless otherwise noted, all the Bible passages in this book are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV). The only exception is that all the unmarked passages from 1, 2, and 3 John are my own translation. So, in the places where I have used the ESV's translation of John's letters, those passages are marked with the label "ESV."

In my own translations of 1, 2, and 3 John, I have tried to stay as literally close to the original Greek text as possible, especially to make some of the nuances clearer that I talk about in my exposition of the passages. This makes my translation rougher than most translations you will find, but it helps to get to the clear meaning of the passage. So, if I need to supply a word that doesn't actually exist to make sense of a passage, that word appears in italics.

On the other hand, if a purely literal translation would have resulted in English gibberish, I smoothed the translation out just enough to make it readable while sacrificing as little of the original sense as possible. This isn't really a translation meant for in-depth exegetical work, and it probably isn't ideal for normal reading. Instead, it's a translation written to help cast light on the nuances of what John is teaching us about discipleship in these letters.

Introduction

When Jesus describes the kind of relationship that he wants to have with us, he says, “Come, follow me.” This is what he said to his first group of disciples, and this is still what he tells those of us who would be his disciples today. That is what it means to be a disciple—to follow him wherever he leads us by learning from him, enjoying his presence, and obeying what he teaches us along the way.

Over the last two thousand years, Christians have written countless books on the subject of discipleship. A few of these books have become enduring classics that continue to be read even hundreds of years after they were originally published, but countless discipleship books fade quickly into obscurity, largely because there are so many other options available. At this point, don’t we have enough resources on discipleship? Why would I write yet another book on such a thoroughly explored topic, and why should you read it?

What makes this book unique is that I wrote it to teach about Christian discipleship through a close study of the Scriptures themselves. While there are many books about discipleship, there are not nearly enough that primarily expound the Bible. The best resources on discipleship always bring us back to God’s word because following Jesus ultimately means that we need to learn directly from Jesus in his word.

The whole reason God spoke to us in the first place was so that we could come to know him as well as knowing “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). “All

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Scripture,” Paul writes, “is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Indeed, all Scripture is profitable, but about nine years ago, I began learning just how powerful one portion of Scripture in particular was for teaching the essentials of Christian discipleship.

Nine years ago, I studied 1 John in-depth for the first time.

DISCIPLESHIP ACCORDING TO JOHN

I initially studied 1 John seriously in the fall of 2005, when I was part of a team who prepared a Bible study for all the small groups in my college ministry. I will always treasure my memories of that study time together as we pored over the text of 1 John.

Since then I have preached on various passages from the letters of John at seven different churches, preaching all the way through 1 John twice at two churches where I served as interim pastor. I have led several one-to-one Bible studies with individuals whom I had the privilege of discipling, and I even saw someone come to know Jesus for the first time during one of those individual studies. The book of 1 John is precious to me.

At some point along the way, I began to reflect on what the Apostle John tells us when he describes his purpose behind writing the letter in 1 John 5:13: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life” (ESV). What’s so interesting about this verse is that John wrote something almost identical toward the end of his book we call the Gospel of John:

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you

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may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)

John's first letter is written "to you who believe in the name of the Son of God," but the Gospel of John is written "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Additionally, 1 John is written "that you may know that you have eternal life," while the Gospel of John is written "that by believing you may have life in his name."

The best way to understand these two books, then, is to recognize John wrote his Gospel for the purpose of evangelism (to help people who don't know Christ to begin to know him) but that he then wrote his first letter for the purpose of discipleship (to help people who do know Christ to know him better). This doesn't mean that John's Gospel has nothing to offer to believers, or that 1 John cannot lead anyone to a saving knowledge of Christ—in fact, both of those ideas are absolutely false. Instead, this simply means that John had different primary purposes for writing each, and that the primary purpose of 1 John is for training disciples.

When I reflected on this, I began to ask, "So what did John do in 1 John for the sake of training disciples?" If someone published a new book on discipleship today, most of us would have a pretty good idea of what we might find inside the book, even if we never opened it. But what would a Holy Spirit-inspired apostle of the Lord Jesus include in his book about discipleship?

As I asked those questions, I began to see that John's letter is both simple and wide reaching. With deceptively easy writing (students studying Greek for the first time often begin by reading 1 John because the Greek is so simple), John focuses on four main topics: the righteousness of God, our own sin, the gospel of Jesus, and how we begin to live as obedient disciples as a result of the work of the gospel in our lives. John returns again and again to these same topics throughout the entire letter, building and developing, returning and reflecting, spiraling closer and closer toward

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the center of his message.

But even so, John never repeats himself. He says similar things along the way, but in each section of 1 John, the apostle looks at his core curriculum from a fresh angle. In this way, John covers a broad range of topics that every Christian, from the newest convert to the most seasoned saint, desperately needs: truth, gospel, growth, perseverance, hope, righteousness, discernment, love, faith, prayer, and eternal life. Then, he gives a practical demonstration of these topics through two case studies in 2 John and 3 John.

Sometimes, John teaches about deep theological issues, such as the incarnation of Jesus or the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Other times, he asks searchingly practical questions of how we are caring for the most vulnerable in our midst: “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (1 John 3:17 ESV). Everywhere, he writes warmly, with sensitive pastoral care and a deep passion for the glory of Jesus Christ, as well as a clear vision of the gospel:

¹My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ²He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1–2 ESV)

The letters of John are simple but complex. The youngest Christian will find these letters easily digestible, but John has actually provided a feast for all believers to return to again and again over the course of our discipleship journeys. I have been through 1 John several times over the last nine years, and I can tell you from my own experience that we will always find some new dish to taste that we had not yet discovered.

Gregory the Great (540–604) wrote, “Scripture is like a river again, broad and deep, shallow enough here for the lamb to go wading, but deep enough there for the elephant to swim.”¹ Gregory wrote this sentence in his commentary on

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Job, but it is often quoted today to describe the Gospel of John. Regardless of Gregory's original intent, his statement is absolutely true of 1, 2, and 3 John.

A PRIMER ON CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

This book is an exploration of what God teaches us about following Jesus through the writings of his beloved servant John. I cannot offer wildly new ideas or special insights into divine mysteries, and you should probably not trust me if I did! Instead, I can only claim that I have sought to follow the example of the many godly teachers who have gone before me by putting God's word on center stage so that we could all gaze together upon the glory of Jesus revealed there. It is my prayer that this book will help you to know Jesus better through his word, not that you would pay any particular attention to the book itself.

This book is also the first in what I hope will be a series of several studies of the Scriptures, which I am calling the Primer Series. I have already begun planning future volumes for this series that, God-willing, will share this vision for seeing and loving Jesus in and through his word.

But for now, let's open God's word together to the First Letter of John. May God pour out his Holy Spirit upon us to give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand all that is contained in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

1 Truth

1 John 1:1–4

For all the ways Jesus could have described our relationship to him, he chose to call us his “disciples.” The Greek word we translate as “disciple” literally means “learner,” which means that at the most basic level, following Jesus means learning more about him all the days of our lives. Being a disciple of Jesus means we are called to learn about his nature, his identity, his character, his great work of salvation, and his instructions for us.

The word *disciple* is closely related to the word *discipline*—not the angry discipline of a cranky teacher, but the discipline that an inspiring teacher, coach, or mentor helps us to achieve to pursue a goal. Just as the discipline of music, writing, painting, or sculpting is something that a disciple would spend a lifetime perfecting, so following Jesus is a lifelong journey to grow in our understanding, love, and faith in Jesus.

This also means that there are not any quick and easy ways of learning as disciples. Do you ever read a passage from the Bible that you don’t understand? Do you ever deal with situations that you don’t think a righteous God ought to have allowed? Do you ever stay up late into the night, praying to God for answers that never seem to come? If so, then you have shared in the common, agonizing, truth-seeking experience of every other follower of Jesus throughout history. Part of

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learning to follow Jesus means learning to trust that he is gracious, loving, and wise even when he chooses not to reveal to us all that we desire to know.

But at the end of the day, Christian truth is characterized not by agony but by joy—or, better, Christian truth is characterized by joy in the midst of agony. Even when following Jesus becomes especially hard, Jesus calls his disciples to continue trusting in him, believing that he is the only place we can find real truth that will satisfy and delight us throughout eternity. As Jesus' disciples, we cannot hedge our bets by looking for truth anywhere else—not because we ourselves have all the answers, but because we believe that Jesus does. Whether he chooses to answer a given question is not the point. Instead, Christian discipleship means recognizing that whatever truth we learn, we will learn it from him.

THE TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY

At its core, Christianity is about truth. Even more, Christianity has nothing at all to offer if the whole thing is based on a lie. Beginning our study of discipleship here is critical, especially in a postmodern world that has redefined truth to be whatever anyone wants it to be. In fact, the Apostle Paul went so far as to say, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19). If the hope we have beyond this life is a sham, then living for Jesus in this life is embarrassingly pathetic.

Some Christians have no problem believing that Christianity is truth. If they did not believe that Christianity was true, they could not be Christians. The issue is not complicated in their minds, and they would probably prefer to skip the subject of truth altogether and just move onto something else.

There are, however, three reasons why we still need to begin our study of discipleship with a study of truth. First, even those who believe in the truth of Christianity nevertheless still struggle to find truth in particular situations in their

lives. Only superficial truth comes easily, and superficial truth cannot satisfy us for very long. If we really want life-giving, joy-in-the-midst-of-sorrow truth, we all need to grow roots that sink deeply into the truth of Jesus.

Second, we need to know how to talk to the people who do not think that Christianity needs to be true to be good or helpful. Some believe that Christianity is mainly about ethics so that Jesus' goal was primarily to teach us how to live good lives. Others believe that Christianity is merely a source of beauty, where we gain personal enrichment and fulfillment. Although Christianity does establish a system of ethics, and although Christianity is a source of beauty, it is more than those things because Christianity is true. But if Christianity is not true, then it cannot be ethical, beautiful, or even good in any way at all. If Christianity is false, then we are fools to pursue it any further.

Third, we need to know how to talk to people who reject the truth of Christianity altogether. Many people do not see beauty in Jesus at all, and they see oppression and bigotry in Christianity rather than ethical righteousness and holiness. Nevertheless, Jesus gave an ongoing commission to his disciples, commanding us to make new disciples from all the nations (Matthew 28:18–20), and that Great Commission requires that we understand how to proclaim the truth of Jesus to those who do not yet believe.

And so, in the opening words of the First Letter of John, the author wastes no time to anchor all that he wants to say in truth—a truth he has personally experienced. He writes:

¹What was from *the* beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched concerning the word of life—²and the life was manifested, and we have seen and we bear witness and we declare to you the eternal life, who was toward the Father and was manifested to us. (1 John 1:1–2)

John seems almost to struggle putting together words that can accurately capture the overwhelming truth of Christianity.

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These verses (along with verse 3) make up a lengthy run-on sentence in the original Greek as John tries to summarize this truth. He begins with three aspects of the truth.

TRUTH IS FROM THE BEGINNING

First, John tells us that the truth is “from the beginning,” which means that the truth is absolute, unchangeable, fixed, eternal, unshakable, and immovable. The truth is the same yesterday, today, and forever. No one can persuade, bully, coerce, push, or change the truth in even the smallest degree.

Christian discipleship means submitting to God’s eternal truth and acknowledging the limitations of our own knowledge. We are new, but God’s truth is from the beginning. We are brief, but God’s truth endures forever. We are small, but God’s truth is big. We are constantly changing, but God’s truth remains the same. The path of discipleship leads us to distrust ourselves while increasingly trusting in God’s truth.

THE LIFE WAS MANIFESTED

Second, John testifies that this truth was put on display among us in a very real, tangible, sensible way as a “life... manifested,” so that John and the other apostles listened to the truth speak, gazed upon the truth with their eyes, and even touched the truth with their hands. This truth is not a pie-in-the-sky abstraction invented by a manipulative con artist to gain power over the weak-minded. Some people will believe any strange idea that a cult leader teaches, but that is not what is happening here. John is not telling us about a floaty, other-worldly idea that came to him in some dream; he is giving us an eyewitness account of someone with whom he personally walked and talked.

John is describing a man—a flesh-and-blood human being, just like you and me. John says that he heard this man speak. He saw this man with his own eyes—in fact, he gazed upon this man long enough to know that this man was a human being, and not just someone who only seemed to be

human. And John is even telling us here that he touched this person with his own hands. This was no angel or ghost or mystical vision in the night—this was a man like us, who lived in our midst.

TRUTH IS A PERSON

Third, John finally identifies this truth. At this point, he knows we are still wondering, What is this truth of Christianity? In what exactly are we putting our confidence and trust? John makes it clear very quickly that when he talks about truth, he is not proclaiming the bizarre teachings of a cult nor a watered-down truth that simply encourages us to be good people. Instead, John points us to something extraordinary, yet practical: truth is not merely a doctrine but a person.

The most intriguing way that John describes this personal relationship between God and the truth is when he writes that this truth was *toward* the Father. Most Bible translations use the word *with* the Father, but the Greek word John selected is not one of the normal words for “with” (*sun* or *meta*) but the word *pros*, which is related to the word *prosopon*, the Greek word for “face.” The Greek word *pros* works almost exactly the way our English language would describe two objects as “facing” each other when they are positioned “toward” each other.

R. C. H. Lenski (1864–1936) explains the effect of using the word *toward* instead of *with* suggests “living relationship, intimate converse.”¹ The Father did not know the truth in a purely intellectual, dry way, but the Father actually had some kind of intimate, face-to-face relationship with the truth!

To understand what John is telling us about the personal nature of this truth, it is important to see the many similarities between 1 John 1:1–2 and the opening verses of the Apostle John’s Gospel. Compare:

1 John 1:1: What was from the beginning...

John 1:1: In the beginning was the Word...

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1 John 1:1: ...what we have seen with our eyes...

John 1:14: ...and we have seen his glory...

1 John 1:2: ...the life was manifested...

John 1:4: In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

1 John 1:2: who was toward [*pros*] the Father...

John 1:1, 2: ...and the Word was with [*pros*] God... He was in the beginning with God.²

1 John 1:2: ...and was manifested to us...

John 1:14: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...

Clearly, the “word of life” in the First Letter of John is the same “Word made flesh” from John’s Gospel: in both places, John is bearing witness to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ! This Jesus is the eternal Son who has been in face-to-face fellowship with the Father from the beginning but who now has been manifested among us as a human being.

This person is the greatest truth that John experienced in his entire life. As John and the other disciples lived in the presence of Jesus, traveling with him, eating and drinking with him, listening to him, and watching him interact with people and with God, they slowly came to understand the identity of their teacher: this man is also God!

The central message of Christianity is that God manifested his truth to us not through science, philosophy, or art (i.e., through human efforts to reach up to God’s truth) but rather by sending his Son down to us to become a fellow human being alongside of us. Whatever else Christianity is, John wants us to know first and foremost that Christianity is about God’s gracious choice to manifest in our midst the truth of the person Jesus Christ, the eternal God who became man.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF CHRISTIANITY

Because truth is a person, the truth of Jesus Christ is more than

just a set of facts. This truth carries important implications that should change the way we live our lives. Specifically, John tells us that the truth of Jesus Christ leads to fellowship in two directions—fellowship within the church and fellowship with the Father and the Son. Put another way, John is telling us that truth is personal.

John continues the run-on sentence that begins his first letter in verses 3 and 4:

³what we have seen and have 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. ⁴And these things we write, that our joy may be filled.

Fellowship means a relational commonality, or something actively shared between those in relationship with one another. John’s description of fellowship, then, is a bit surprising. He explains that his goal in writing is “that also you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” Why is John’s first goal “that also you may have fellowship *with us*”? Why not allow his readers immediate fellowship with the Father and the Son? Why must we have fellowship with John and the apostles first? There are two issues here.

On the one hand, John is not describing a purely institutional fellowship. In other words, he is not urging people toward bare church membership, as though we could be saved simply by making sure to jump through the hoops of joining a church or of making a point of attending the majority of that church’s worship services. Joining a church is important and should never be neglected by anyone serious about following Jesus, but it is Jesus alone who saves and not church membership. As George Smeaton (1814–89) writes, “It is the believer’s relation to Christ that puts him in connection with the Church; not his connection with the Church that puts him into a saving relation to Christ.”³ John is suggesting nothing to the contrary.

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To underscore the fact that Jesus alone saves, consider all the places in 1 John where the apostle speaks of salvation or condemnation (e.g., 1:9; 2:1–2, 22–23; 3:23–24; 4:2–3; 5:4–13, 20–21). In each of these texts, the issue at stake is always whether or not we believe in or reject Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God having-come-in-flesh, the one true God who is eternal life. John is not so much pointing to the people or to the institution as he is insisting upon fellowship (relational commonality) with the apostles regarding the truth of Jesus.

The fellowship “with us” that John writes about, then, is our common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the witness of the apostles concerning the Word of Life who was manifested in their midst. Of course, we must have fellowship with the apostles to join in their fellowship with the Father and the Son—we know nothing about the Father and the Son apart from what they have taught us.

On the other hand, there is a growing tendency among Christians (especially American evangelical Christians) to look upon the institution of the church with some disdain, preferring to take a me-and-Jesus-only approach. The radical individualism of American culture has raised a crop of Christians who embrace Jesus (at least, their own version of Jesus) but who reject the church filled with the other sinners whom Jesus came to save.

Of course, this is understandable to a certain degree. Jesus is perfect; his church is not. Jesus gave his very life that we might live; people in the church can sometimes defend all manner of selfishness and egotism in the name of God. But Christ has not given us the option of embracing himself while rejecting his church. One early Christian theologian named Cyprian of Carthage (200–258) put it bluntly: “You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the church for your Mother.”⁴

Again, it isn’t that bare membership in a church can save you; only Jesus can save. Still, when Christ saves us, he doesn’t bring us to himself as loosely connected individuals, where

each person is connected to Jesus on an individual, one-to-one basis. Instead, he saves us to integrate us all together into his church. We do not have the choice between Christ and the church. Christ died to save his church, and if we are indeed servants of Jesus, then we will love Jesus' church. If you wish to have fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ, you must have fellowship with the church that the Father sent his Son to die for.

But the good news is that God loves his church, and he works uniquely in and through his church to bring truth to his church, first to lead us to salvation and then to teach us for the rest of our lives what it means to follow Jesus day after day. In the church, God sends his Holy Spirit to bring life to dead men, women, and children. In the church, God pours out his Holy Spirit to open up to us the meaning of the Scriptures to convict us of our sin and to grant us the repentance and faith necessary for salvation. In the church, God's Holy Spirit teaches us everything about the glory of the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, who is himself true God and eternal life—and whoever confesses the Son has the Father also (1 John 2:23).

God doesn't give us the fullness of his truth in a vacuum, where we are isolated and on our own. God's truth is a person, and he only gives us the fullness of his truth through our personal relationships with the others in the church whom he is saving. In this fellowship of the church, by the Holy Spirit, the Father grants us full access to himself through the truth of his Son Jesus Christ.

So, we begin our study of discipleship here, with the truth who is a person, Jesus Christ. John is urging us to make his joy complete by embracing the eyewitness testimony of the apostles concerning the truth—that is, concerning the Word of Life manifested—so that we can have fellowship together; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When we think and talk about truth, are we thinking and talking about a person? What would change in our thinking, speaking, and living if we were?
2. The Apostle John balances the necessity of every individual's faith with the necessity of fellowship with the larger church. Do you emphasize one side over the other? What would need to change practically in your life if you struck a more biblical balance?

2

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?