

01. The Epistle of 1 John—1:1

A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier
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Even though John doesn't sign his name to this epistle (nor to his gospel)—the early church knew he had written it and called it "John A" ("First John").

John is known as the 'Apostle of Love' who more than anyone else in the N.T. (except for Jesus Himself) spoke of love and exemplified love.

William MacDonald—

"John's First Epistle is like a family photograph album. It describes those who are members of the family of God. Just as children resemble their parents, so God's children have His likeness too. This Letter describes the similarities. When a person becomes a child of God, he receives the life of God—eternal life. All who have this life show it in very definite ways. For instance, they acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, they love God, they love the children of God, they obey His commandments, and they do not go on sinning. These, then, are some of the hallmarks of eternal life. John wrote this Epistle so that all who have these family traits may know that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13)."

Now, not only does John tell us the characteristics that are manifested (v.2) in the life of a child of God—he makes it a point to say that those lacking these traits are not children of God but are children of the devil.

Look, it isn't that unsaved people can't once in a while do a good or right thing—even a broken clock is right twice a day—but a good clock tells the correct time regularly.

So, it is with unbelievers and true believers—unbelievers practice sin and once in a while do good, whereas believers in Christ practice righteousness and once in a while sin.

This then becomes John's litmus test for determining if a person truly knows the Lord—

1 John 2:3-4 (NKJV)

³ Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. ⁴ He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

1 John 2:9-10 (NKJV)

⁹ He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. ¹⁰ He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him.

John is saying to those in the church back then—

"If you say you're in the light (a true Christian) but you have hatred in your heart for another Christian—you're deceiving yourself and you're still in darkness (lost). If you are truly saved the Holy Spirit lives inside of you, and if the Holy Spirit is inside of you—you can't hate the family of God."

This then becomes the 'litmus test' that John (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) holds up as the determining factor as to whether or not a person is really a Christian.

1 John 3:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love *his* brother abides in death.

Look, John isn't saying that a true Christian will *never* have conflict with another Christian—sometimes families will fight with each other.

John is talking to those who *say* they're saved and yet hate other Christians (Jewish Christians hating Gentiles Christians and vice versa; or years ago in the deep South, whites who went to church and yet hated black Christians or vice versa).

1 John 3:23 (NKJV)

²³ And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

1 John 4:20-21 (NKJV)

²⁰ If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? ²¹ And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also.

The way our love for God is manifested is in how we love (and treat) each other. Anyone who says they love God and *yet hates* other Christians, regardless of what church they go to or denomination they belong to—is a liar and deluding themselves.

This is strong language coming from the 'Apostle of Love'—but sometimes professing Christians need a 'kick in the pants' instead of constant 'pats on the back'.

John's message, although hard for many to hear, became the strong medicine needed to heal the division in the early church—a simple message for the people of God to—love one another!

Now, John in saying this was no 'ivory tower' theologian—he was speaking from experience.

John was the last of the Apostles to die—which meant he had to watch many of his brothers in the faith die terrible deaths as followers of Jesus.

- *Peter was crucified upside down.*
- *James was thrown off the pinnacle of the Temple and when it was discovered the fall didn't finish him—a crowd of angry Jews beat him to death with clubs.*
- *Some disciples were dragged by horses up and down the coliseum steps until their brains were dashed out.*
- *Some were impaled on poles, covered with tar and set on fire to light Nero's garden at night.*

Tradition says that it was Emperor Domitian who sentenced John himself to be boiled in oil for proclaiming Jesus as Savior and Lord, but that the boiling oil had no effect on him (which tells us that until God is through with us, we are indestructible!)

Domitian then ordered John sent to the Isle of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor—a barren rock that juts up out of the Aegean Sea which also served as a Roman penal colony where prisoners were sent to die.

But while John was on Patmos, alone, forsaken and isolated—it was there that Jesus visited him and gave to John the greatest revelation in the Bible—the Book of Revelation.

Sometimes when we're feeling alone, forsaken and isolated—we're prone to think that God has abandoned us, that He's thru with us and that this is how our life is going to end—I'm wondering if John felt that way. But God wasn't finished with John—in fact God allowed the *isolation* for the purpose of revelation!

And that could be exactly what God has in mind for you, if you find yourself in a similar place as John—to show you Jesus in a way you would have never thought possible. To bring revival to your heart and revelation to your life—to lift you to a whole new level of usefulness for God. Look, sometimes when things are going well, we tend to 'cruise' in our walk with God.

If we have time to do our devotions—fine; and if not, that's fine too we'll just do them later (which often never happens). But when we're really feeling alone and isolated, we become desperate and seek Him in a way we don't when things are going well.

It's out of these times of desperation and isolation that we seek the Lord with real intensity—and that is when Jesus will come to us and meet with us in a fresh and powerful way.

Take heart if tonight you're on your own personal Isle of Patmos—take hope, Jesus will reveal Himself to you in a way you didn't expect or maybe didn't think was possible.

After Domitian died in A.D. 96 John was allowed to return to Ephesus where he lived out the remainder of his life and ministry and was buried there. But while he was there, in semi-retirement, God thru the inspiration of the Holy Spirit had John pen the Gospel of John, First, Second and Third John and the Book of Revelation.

Now by this time he was quite elderly (around 100), and he had seen and been thru much heartache in his life—and yet John had a message he wanted to share with the churches of Asia Minor. So, as an old man he was taken from church to church, sometimes he was so weak they would have to help him up to the platform—many times they would have him sit in a chair which they then carried up to the platform.

Asoovius, the historian, tells us that when he came into the church the whole place would break out in applause and they would say, *"There's the apostle John, the last living eye witness of Jesus Christ!"*

As John was brought in front of the church, everyone would stop talking, anxious to hear what this great man of God had to say to them. And John's message was always the same—*"My little children, love one another!"*—and then he'd sit down or the young men would carry him off. He went thru out all of Asia Minor preaching the same message.

Once, when asked by an elder of one of these churches—*"John, why is it that, that's all you ever tell us. Why don't you tell us something heavy or profound?"*

Asoovius tells us that John looked at him and said, *"This is the sole command of Christ—to love one another. He who loves has need of nothing else."*

John was convinced that the key to walking with God was all wrapped up in the concept of loving people—something God taught John first-hand.

You see, John wasn't always a loving, kind-hearted man—he and his brother James were notorious 'hot-heads'

They were such hot-heads that Jesus gave them the name *Boanerges*, that is, "Sons of Thunder". (Mark 3:16-17)

We see an example of their tempers in Luke 9—

Luke 9:51-54 (NKJV)

⁵¹ Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, ⁵² and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. ⁵³ But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ And when His disciples James and John saw *this*, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?"

So, because these people didn't want Jesus and His disciples in their village—John and James said, "*Lord, let us blast these guys! Let us burn 'um up!*" But listen to what Jesus said to them—

Luke 9:55-56 (NKJV)

⁵⁵ But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. ⁵⁶ For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save *them*." And they went to another village.

Basically, Jesus said "*I haven't come to blast but to bless. I haven't come to burn but to build.*"

Listen again to what Jesus said, "*You don't know what spirit you are of?*"

1 John 4:8 says that 'God is love'. As Christians, God the Spirit lives inside of us—the Spirit is love.

That is what Spirit we are of—the Spirit of life not death; the Spirit of love not hate. So, we can see that this man who was called the "Apostle of Love" didn't start out that way—he was not a lover of men, he was a son of thunder!

But as he spent time beholding Jesus, looking at Jesus, spending time with Jesus—he began to change—he became a man of love. It wasn't his natural inclination or his human character—it was a total work of the Holy Spirit from within (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Remember that next time your prone to think, "*I can't be a person who loves—it's just not in my nature.*" Or, "*I just can't forgive that person for what they did to me—I don't have the strength.*"

Listen, the same Spirit of God Who lived in John and changed him from a hot-headed 'son of thunder', into someone who went around telling people "*children, love one another*"—is the Spirit who works in you and me! He did it for John and He'll do it for you and me—if we really want to change.

It won't happen overnight—but little by little you will be transformed into the image of Jesus. And that's why it's going to be a blessing to study 1John (as well as John's gospel on Sunday mornings)—so we can gaze at Jesus thru the verses of this epistle.

The goal is that the more we behold Jesus, the more we will be transformed into His likeness—so that we too might become a disciple of love!

One pastor put it this way—

"Look, as great as it is to be a people who move in missions. As wonderful as it is to be a people who study the Word of God. As powerful and great as it is to be a people who are flowing in the things of the Spirit. And as

dynamic as it is to be doing the works of ministry—the most important thing we can do, above all, is to demonstrate God’s love to the people of this world—and it starts with the family of God.”

John 13:35 (NKJV)

³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Chapter 1

1 John 1:1 (NKJV)

¹ **That which was from the beginning...**

You will notice how similar the language is in 1John as compared with the gospel of John—and that’s one of the main reasons scholars believe the same man wrote both.

One of these scholars estimates that at least 80 percent of the verses in 1John reflect concepts found in the Gospel of John reinforcing the belief that John wrote this epistle *after* he wrote his gospel—sometime between A.D. 90–95.

John began his Gospel with the words, **“In the beginning was the Word...”** (a preincarnate title for Jesus Christ)

John opens his first Epistle with the words, **“That which was from the beginning...”**

You see, when John starts his Gospel with the words, **“In the beginning was the Word”**—it immediately takes us back to the first words in the Bible—*“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”*. In Genesis 1:1, those words are connected to the creation of the physical universe.

But whereas Genesis starts with the physical creation and moves us forward in time—John begins his Gospel back before time and the physical universe existed to teach the pre-existence of Christ to the creation.

When John says, *“In the beginning was the Word”* he uses the imperfect of the Greek word *eimi* which expresses the idea of *“continuous timeless existence”*. This is in contrast to the word for *“was”* in verse 3—*“All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made”*—that Greek word is *“egeneto”* and means *“to come into existence”* or to *“begin to be.”*

In fact, it’s so important to John that we understand that Jesus Christ (the Word) has always existed, and that he had no beginning (He was not a created being) that in the Greek—he leaves out the definite article.

And so instead of verse 1 reading, **“In the beginning was the Word”** and verse 2 reading, **“He was in the beginning with God”**—it actually reads, *“In beginning was the Word”* and *“He was in beginning with God.”*

He also does this to open his first Epistle—**“That which was from beginning...”**

By leaving out the definite article, John is telling us that he doesn’t have a *definite* beginning in mind when he talks about Christ’s existence. If John had used the definite article, we might have been misled into thinking he was referring to the beginning spoken of in Genesis 1:1—the beginning when everything in the physical universe was created.

And that might have led us to believe that Jesus Himself had a beginning at the same time as the physical creation—which of course would make Him a created being and not the eternal Creator of all things (John 1:3).

The doctrine that teaches that Jesus was a created being is known as Arianism—a doctrine that Jehovah Witnesses have embraced and teach. So, in an effort to teach the eternality of Christ, or His pre-existence to the physical creation, John leaves out the definite article and just begins his gospel with the words, “*In beginning was the Word*” and his first epistle with, “*That which was from beginning*”.

Which immediately begs the question, “*what beginning?*”—and that’s John’s point—it doesn’t matter.

It doesn’t matter what ‘beginning’ you choose—pick any beginning you want—Jesus already existed!

As far back as you want to go before the physical creation—a thousand years, ten thousand years, ten billion, ten trillion years—no matter how far back into eternity past your beginning begins—the Word already was.

So, John wants us to be clear that the Word (Jesus Christ) already existed before everything was created. Why is that such an important point for John to communicate to us?

It’s important because John, in his gospel, is presenting the divinity of Christ by first of all talking about the pre-existence of Christ to the creation of the material universe or in other words the *eternalness or eternality* of Jesus Christ.

His divinity is a very important doctrine (John 8:24) and John does make reference to it at the beginning of his first epistle—

1 John 1:2 (NKJV)

² the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life [speaking of the Word, Jesus Christ] which was with the Father and was manifested to us--

But here in 1 John, he starts out by coming against the first heresy the church faced—which was not against Jesus’ *divinity*—it was against His *humanity*.

It was a heresy that had its roots in **Gnosticism**. The word ‘Gnostic’ comes from the Greek word ‘gnōsis’ which means ‘knowledge’ (mystical knowledge). The Gnostics were always teaching people if they meditated a certain way or chanted the right way then—all the secret treasures of hidden spiritual wisdom and knowledge would be unlocked to them.

Part of the teachings of Gnosticism grew out of the philosophical question, “*Why is there evil in this world if creation was made by a holy God?*” As these philosophers pondered that question, they came to the false conclusion that *matter* (the physical universe) was evil—and since matter was evil it couldn’t have been the creation of a holy God.

So then where did the material universe come from?

A. T. Robertson explains:

“The Gnostic speculation concerned itself primarily with the origin of the universe and the existence of evil. They assumed that God is good and yet there is evil in existence. Their theory was that evil is inherent in matter. And yet the good God could not create evil matter. So they postulated a series of emanations, aeons, spirits, angels that came in between God and matter.

The idea was that one aeon came from God, another aeon from this aeon, and so on till there was one far enough away from God for God not to be contaminated by the creation of evil matter and yet close enough to have power to do the work.”

Now the real problem with the teaching that matter is evil, from a doctrinal standpoint—was in the way they applied it to Jesus Christ. You see the Gnostics reasoned that if matter was evil then Jesus couldn't have come in the flesh because then—He would have been evil.

So many Gnostics claimed He must have come as a *spirit* and not as a physical flesh and blood man (a denial of His humanity).

That's why the Apostle John opened his first Epistle with the words—

1 John 1:1 (NKJV)

¹ That which was from the beginning, **which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life--**

He said this because he was also trying to refute Gnostic teaching about Jesus not coming in a physical body.

1 John 4:2-3 (NLT2)

² This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. ³ But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus [that He has come in a real flesh and blood body], that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here.

2 John 1:7 (NLT2)

⁷ I say this because many deceivers have gone out into the world. They deny that Jesus Christ came in a real body. Such a person is a deceiver and an antichrist.

Other Gnostics believed that since Jesus *was* a physical man (too much evidence to deny that truth) and that since the physical was evil and God cannot be evil—they concluded that Jesus couldn't have been *God* in the flesh (a denial of His divinity).

And that's why Paul said—

Colossians 2:8-9 (NKJV)

⁸ Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;

So Gnostic heresy denied the Lord's humanity (and to a lesser degree His divinity)—which became a major point of refutation by the writers of the New Testament.

We will continue next time, although we needed to lay some doctrinal groundwork to fully understand John's Epistle.