

THE EPISTLES OF 1, 2, & 3 JOHN
RWANDAN PASTOR'S CONFERENCE
SESSION II
LIGHT & DARKNESS
1 JOHN 1:5-2:27

In this session we are going to cover a 1 John 1:5 to 2:27. In these passages we will see the great diversity of this epistle. We are going to see the Apostle John's wonderful pastoral heart and love for the recipients of this letter. Additionally, we are going to see critical elements of John's theology. Toward the end of the session we are going to see John giving us a glimpse into the false teachings that were threatening the churches. We are going to break this session into three primary sections, 1:5-10; 2:1-11; and 2:15-27.

WALKING IN THE LIGHT: 1 JOHN 1:5-10:

Let's read these verses:

Do you see why I have labeled this section "Walking in the Light"?

In the opening I mentioned that we were going to see John functioning as a loving pastor, as a theologian, and also see him making his argument against the false teachings of heretical views that had infiltrated these congregations. John has a unique ability to blend his pastoral care for the people with key theological components. Just such an example is seen here in this passage.

Notice the opening of v. 5: John has just completed explaining that his role was to testify to all that which he had been a personal eyewitness as he followed Christ. Now immediately in v. 5 jumps directly into the task by noting that the very message he received from Christ, and now proclaims to the congregation is that "„*God is light, and in Him there is no darkness.*” Some find it striking that John has switched from discussion Jesus to discussing the Father so quickly. However, we must recall that one of the roles of Christ was to reveal the Father.

John turns to a very familiar theme of his: "*light and dark*". In his treatment here, John's theology on the *nature of God* is in focus.

What is important about understanding the nature of something or someone?

Let's look at the animal kingdom. Within this realm there are animals that have a nature that lends them to being domesticated. Some even have natures that make them valued members of the family. Yet other animals, such as snakes, lions, wildebeests, bears, and so many others have natures that make them very unfit to human cohabitation. We see this, know this, and clearly understand this about the nature of animals.

John is giving us a glimpse into the nature of God!! In his treatment of the Apostle is sharing with us on the moral and ethical nature of God. God is morally good, which is equated to light. Not only is He morally good, but John gives us the degree of God's goodness by noting that in Him there is no darkness, no evil. Theologically, John is telling us about the absolute moral and ethical goodness of God.

Immediately he then turns to the pastoral element of this statement. Remember, our theology always matters, but never does it matter more than when it is put into action in our lives. This is exactly where John is going. In v.6-10 he uses a series of 5 conditional sentences. In English we call these "if – then" statements. "If" one does some particular act, "then" there will be a set outcome or result. For example: "If" the child tries to pet the snake, "then" he will almost certainly be bitten.

Notice that in v.6-10 there are two groupings. In v.6-7 the Apostle is giving contrasting conditional statements. Notice how they each depict a different picture. The first one depicts a person who claims to be a believer, but his life actions do not match up with his statements. V. 7 is just the opposite. True believers do not just "say" they believe in Christ, they actually live lives that demonstrate their heart-felt belief.

In v. 8-10 John presents the second group of conditional statements. First, in v.8 the Apostle highlights the human tendency to deceive ourselves. Some scholars speculate that John was targeting some of the false teachings at the time. Regardless of that, we can know for certain that the Apostle is making it very clear that we all have sin in our lives. If we think we do not, then we are simply deceiving ourselves! This verse is immediately followed by v.9 where John makes clear that when we understand that we sin, and through heart-felt guilt, we confess our sins to God, then He is always faithful to forgive. Then v.10 restates the basic premise of v.8, yet with a different twist. Here the Apostle demonstrates that when we claim to be without sin, not only are we deceiving ourselves (v.8), but we are also making God out to be a liar!!

How is it that claiming to be without sin makes God out to be a liar?

In just the preceding verses John has made clear the morally pure nature of God. Additionally, recall the numerous places in Scripture where God's word is clear that all humans have sin, Romans 3:23 stands as one example. Note further the words of Christ in John's Gospel 14:6 in that the only way to the Father is through the Son. For anyone to claim that they have fellowship with the Father, and have no sin in their life, not only are they deceiving themselves, but their claims are in direct contradiction with Scripture which is God-breathed. Such a claim, as John says, makes God out to be a liar!

In our opening session we briefly discussed that John develops three basic themes within this letter: faith, obedience, and love. Notice how the Apostle has woven the first two elements together in these verses of chapter 1. True faith leads to obedient lifestyles.

THE COMMAND TO LOVE: 1 JOHN 2:1-11:

V. 1-2:

As we move into this section, we are going to see the Apostle begin to develop the third theme, the theme of love. However, before we go there, I want to call your attention to another example of John's ability to weave his pastoral concern for the people with sound doctrine. In v. 1-2 John begins with one of the most endearing openings he can: "*My little children,,*" This exemplifies the great care and love he has for these people.

On the theological front, John first notes clearly that when we do sin, we have Christ as our Advocate to the Father. How much more can anyone ask for than to have Jesus Christ as our personal Advocate to the Father? John's second theological point is found in v.2 where he refers to Christ as the propitiation for our sins. Some would advocate that God simply "cancels" or "dismisses" our sins. The term for this is expiation. Yet Scripture teaches that while God is perfectly loving, He is also perfectly just. The justice of God demands proper atonement for sin. When John, and all the New Testament authors write on this subject, they refer to Christ as the *ἱλασμος* this term literally means "*an atoning sacrifice*". God does not simply dismiss our sin. His justice required an atoning sacrifice for them. Jesus is that atoning sacrifice! This is the concept behind propitiation. The final theological point John makes here is at the close of v.2 where he notes that Christ is not only the propitiation for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world. Here we draw near to a long debated subject that lies beyond the scope of our discussion.

Despite this, it is safe to say that John is being consistent with his previous writings to illustrate the universal *provision* that Christ's sacrifice affords. We must always recognize that there is a distinct difference between the universal *provision* of salvation in Christ and the *application* of that provision. Christ died for all, but not all will accept his offer of grace.

V.3-6:

Turning next to v.3-5, notice the similarity and parallel to 1:6-7. John message of obedience linked to faith rings clear here once again. However, I would draw out one other aspect the Apostle is bringing in with these verses: *assurance*. Three times in these verses John uses the term "know". He does so in both the positive affirmation of assurance in v.3 and 5, he also uses this term in the negative in the disqualification of assurance in v.4.

Another key point comes forward in v.5. John begins here to introduce the third element of his epistle, the element of "love". By true saving faith we come to Christ. Through this same faith we obey his commands and live our lives as He did. Finally, John tells us that the result of this process is that the love of God is made perfect. This love of God that John writes about may also be translated as "God's kind of love".¹ This is the kind of love that brought Christ from heaven to the cross. This is the kind of love that we can come to know when we truly walk in faith and obedience.

V.7-11:

This is one of those passages that often make me a little crazy. The heart of the message is clear, John is elaborating and further developing the theme of *God's kind of love* which he introduced in v.6. The confusing component is John's reference to this not being, then being a new commandment. On the surface, v. 7 and 8 would seem contradictory. In fact, John's language is perfect. This deep commitment to the expression of love toward God and for one another was long a part of Jewish heritage. When Christ was asked about the greatest commandment in Mt. 22:34-40, he referenced Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. So as John says, this message of love is not a new commandment. Yet it is new in the sense that we can now more clearly see this "God kind of love" through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!²

The last three verses in this group follow a pattern that should be very familiar to us by now. John loves to present contrasting positions. In v.9-11 he is again demonstrating how one's actions in life indicate much about where their heart truly is. The man who hates his brother, is the one who walks in darkness. This is contrasted by the man who loves his brother, abides in the Light.

I want to draw your attention to a couple of points here: First, notice the man in v.10 now **abides** in the Light. This is contrasted to 1:7 where he is described as merely **walking** in the Light. John is depicting the special intimacy we each have with God through the work of Jesus Christ.³ The second point I want to make here is in reference to the spiritual condition of the man in v.11. Notice that this **man walks in the darkness**. Now, recall what John said in 1:5: **“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”** John is telling us that the spiritual condition of the man who walks in the darkness is that of a person completely separated from God.

2:12-14:

We are not going to spend much time on this passage. These verses are both repetitive and poetic in their style. This is true of both the English and Greek presentations. There are several theories regarding this passage. I personally adhere to a two-fold position that first, John is using repetition in order to provide emphasis to his audience. Secondly, I would contend that his reference to the various groups demonstrates that he is speaking to the entirety of the congregation, not just to a specific person or category of people.

THE WARNINGS: 2:15-27:

The Apostle has now developed the three themes of faith, obedience, and love. At this point he is turning attention toward providing stern warnings to them. Over the course of the next 13 verses, John is going to give them two very explicit warnings. First, he is going to warn them not to love the world, and secondly he is going to warn them in detail about the false teachers among them. Once again I would ask you to be watchful for how he weaves both sound pastoral counseling with theological truth. Let's get into the first passage:

2:15-17:

I want to start with a single point in biblical interpretation. In the original language, when John says **“do not love the world”** he is using what is called an imperative verb. These verbs are most commonly used to express ***a command*** to do, ***or prohibit something***. Every language

utilizes imperatives. Think about your children. We all recall times when we have warned them sternly not to do something. For example: “Do not hit your sister!”, “Do not tease your brother!” Imperatives are present in every language and form the basis for how we highly stress or warn about something.

So, when we look at what John says here in v.15, give me your reflection on the questions below:⁴

Why would John tell us not to love the world when he has just spent the past few verses developing the “love theme” by noting that we are to love one another?

Additionally, how do we equate the command not to love the world in v.15 to John 3:16 where Jesus speaks of God’s great love for the world?

The key to both of these questions lies in the way John uses the term **“world”**. In Greek this is the term **κοσμος**. In the English language we still use this word. In all of John’s writings he employs the term many, many times in the New Testament. In fact, John uses this term 102 times out of the 187 examples where it is used in the New Testament.

When John uses the term **“world”**, he does so in one of three ways: First, it can be used in relation to the **“created universe”** (1 John 3:17; 4:17; John 1:10). Secondly, John also uses this term to refer to **“the world of human persons”** (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). Finally, John uses this term to the **“evil organized earthly system that is controlled by Satan”** which is aligned against God and His kingdom (1 John 4:3-5; 5:19; John 16:11).

Here in v.15 John is using the term “world” as in the third meaning. The “world” here refers to the evil system of Satan, acting in the world in opposition to God. John is **commanding** the believers not to love this system. He is not *“advising”* or *“requesting”* that they try to refrain from this. No!! He is commanding them, he is ordering them. Do you see how this fits into the three themes of faith, obedience, and love???

John goes on in v.16 to describe what love of the world looks like. Satan’s fingerprint is all over things like lust of the flesh and eyes along with human pride. These terms speak for themselves. Then in v.17 John demonstrates what is at stake: eternity. The contrast is clear, this world seems appealing, but in the end, it is perishing, and the one who follows in this path shall

perish with it! On the other hand, the one who does the will of God (the one who walks in faith, obedience, and love) ***lives forever!!!!***

v.18-27:

We are going to close out this session with this rather long passage. In order to help us break this down a bit, let's look at these verses in the three groups:

1. V.18-19: Coming of the antichrists (false teachers) and the schism.
2. V.20-23: The lie of the antichrists.
3. V.24-27: Resist the antichrists and abide in Christ.

v. 18-19:

Each of these verses has a poetic structure. Notice that each begins and ends very similarly. Aside from that, there are several key points we want to address. First, notice that John is referring to the presence of antichrists. John's writings contain many references to both a singular, personal antichrist as well as plural, impersonal antichrists. The former is a reference to the individual who will occupy much of the final days just prior to the second coming of Jesus. The latter is simply a reference to the many false prophets and teachers that would come in the latter days. These false teachers would come and lead many away from the true gospel of Christ. John is dealing with this latter version.

Notice that in v.19 these are people who had once been a part of the church community. They have left the community of their own volition. Their decision to remove themselves from the community, particularly for the reasons that we will soon see, demonstrates that they never truly believed in the gospel of Christ.⁵

Is John saying that anyone who leaves a church is an antichrist?

Clearly people leave congregations for a variety of reasons. Some move from one town to another. Others move because they have some personal disagreement with other members. While we would always prefer for people to reconcile their differences, sometimes this just doesn't happen and people who truly love the Lord leave for other churches. But this is not what John is facing. These antichrists did not leave the church because they disagreed about what color to paint the building. The term John uses to describe these people "antichrists" tells us much. The reason these people left was because they held to beliefs that were "*against Christ*".

v.20-23:

John opens this critical section on the lies of the false teachers by first acknowledging that the faithful believers, those who truly hold to belief in Jesus as the Christ, have been anointed, or set apart by the Holy One. There are many theories regarding exactly which member of the Trinity John is referring to as the Holy One. The majority view of scholars would be that John is referencing Jesus. Once a person comes to Jesus in faith, Christ sets us apart (anoints) for the special ministry that he created each of us for.

In v.21, John continues to encourage the believers by affirming to them that they already know the truth. He is not writing to a congregation of people who have been deceived and led astray, and thus in need of correction. These believers have held firm to the true gospel message. They have obviously resisted the false teaching of the antichrists to the point that the antichrists have separated from the body. They know the truth, and they have persevered in the face of adverse and false teaching!!

In v.22-23 John gives us a glimpse of specifically what is being taught. Obviously we do not have every detail of the heretical teachings. However, John does tell us that these people are denying that Jesus is the Christ (v.22), and further that by denying the Son, they do not have the Father (v.23). Whatever their specific teaching were, we can see from these verses that they clearly deny Jesus both as the Christ and as being the Son of God.

Here John is addressing a very critical theological point. Why do you think he is taking such a stance?

There can be no compromising of the humanity and the divinity of Jesus Christ. The position of the antichrists seems consistent with those who held to Jesus' divinity, but denied that he was truly human. John knew that this was an intolerable heresy that had to be stamped out. To deny the humanity of Christ is to deny the incarnation. To deny the incarnation is to deny the crucifixion and the resurrection. To deny the crucifixion and the resurrection is to totally dismiss correct Christian belief. There can be no Christianity without the cross; and there can be no cross without the incarnation of the divine Son of God – Jesus Christ!!

v.24-27:

John closes this powerful section with an appeal to perseverance. The Apostle Paul often referred to believers “running the good race” as a reference to a lifestyle of obedience to God that flows from faith in Christ. Likewise here, John is imploring the true believers to continue to “abide” in what they had been taught from the outset. Again the themes of faith, obedience, and

the God kind of love relationship are in view. Once again we see the Apostle demonstrate the close, personal connection that every believer has with both the Son and the Father!!

Then in v.25 John reminds the believers of the great promise that has been given us by Jesus,,,, the promise of eternal life for those who truly believe in him. We do not know for sure, but it is reasonable to assume that the schism of the church could well have created some doubts. John has spent this passage calling out the false teachers for what they are – antichrists. He has encouraged the believers for their right beliefs. He has detailed what is wrong with the false teachers’ doctrine. He has called for perseverance on the part of the believers. Now, he has reminded them of the great promise they received from Christ, the promise of eternal life!!

ENDNOTES

¹ Daniel L. Akin. *The New American Commentary: vol. 38 1,2,3 John*. Edited by Richard R. Melick Jr., Paige Patterson, Curtis Vaughan. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2001. 24.

² Ibid. 96.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. 108.

⁵ Ibid. 116.