

‘THAT YOUR JOY MAY BE FULL’

A STUDY OF THE EPISTLES OF ST. JOHN

PART II

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‘No greater joy can I have than this, to bear that my children follow the truth.’

III JOHN 4

OBJECTIVE:

In this study over the coming weeks, we will examine *I, II & III John*. These are three rich yet often overlooked New Testament books. These “hidden” gems reveal fascinating insights about life in the early Church and impart apostolic wisdom on topics such as prayer, holiness, the sacraments and the nature of love. Above all, the Johannine epistles call us to place Jesus Christ at the center of our lives, and to live in the joy of the Risen Lord. This is our objective.

STRATEGY:

Our approach will be twofold:

- i. Last week, in PART ONE, we introduced the Johannine epistles, taking a close look at a key passage in *I John—the prologue (I John 1:1-4)*. We focused our attention on the two shorter epistles (*II, III John*), seeking to understand their main message—then and now.
- ii. Tonight, in PART TWO, we will return to *I John*. As we move chapter-to-chapter, we’ll pay close attention to a “crisis” in John’s community that threatened its unity and the faith of many individual believers. We will also come to understand better what John means in the famous ‘God is love’ passage—and what he desires for us today.

PART TWO:

THE APOSTLES OF LOVE RESPONDS TO A CHURCH IN CRISIS

I. OUTLINE OF THE EPISTLE¹

- I. Prologue (1:1–4) The Word of Life
- II. Live in the Light (1:5–2:29)
 - a. God Is Light (1:5–7)
 - b. First Condition for Living in the Light: Confess and Renounce Sin (1:8–2:2)

¹ Adapted from: Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 51, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1989), xxxiii.

- c. Second Condition: Practice Obedient (2:3–11)
- d. Third Condition: Reject Worldliness (2:12–17)
- e. Fourth Condition: Keep the Faith (2:18–29)
- III. Live As Children of God (3:1–5:13)
 - a. God Is Father (3:1–3)
 - b. First Condition for Living as God’s Children: Confess and Renounce Sin (3:4–9)
 - c. Second Condition: Practice Obedience (3:10–24)
 - d. Third Condition: Reject Worldliness (4:1–6)
 - e. Fourth Condition: Be Loving (4:7–5:4)
 - f. Fifth Condition: Keep the Faith (5:5–12)
- IV. Conclusion (5:13–21) Christian Confidence

[See last week’s outline for a full discussion of *I John* 1:1-4]

II. LIVE IN THE LIGHT (1:5–2:29)

a. God Is Light (1:5–7)

- **v. 5 *GOD IS LIGHT*** ... Like the *Gospel of John*, *I John* frequently uses terms such as: *life*, *light*, and *darkness*.² In this way, both the gospel and the epistle engage the hearer in the language of *Genesis*. This is intentional and programmatic, as John’s theology is one of ‘creation / new creation’. See: *Gen.* 1:3–5;³ 2:7;⁴ *Isa.* 9:2.⁵
- **v. 6 *WE LIE AND DO NOT LIVE ACCORDING TO THE TRUTH*** ... The Apostle is compelled to expose a growing schism in the church, in which former members are deceiving some believers into accepting false doctrines.
- **v. 7 *WALK IN THE LIGHT*** ... The symbol of “light” is used to speak of God’s perfection, in which there is “no darkness at all” (v. 5). John is calling the church to deeper sanctity. He has in mind both *purity of mind* (i.e. sound doctrine) and *purity of heart* (sound moral living).
- ** In what follows in ch. 1-2, John will describe four “conditions” or expectations for “walking in the light” – (1) confess and renounce sin; (2) practice obedience; (3) reject worldliness; and (4) keep the Faith.

b. First Condition for Living in the Light: Confess and Renounce Sin (1:8–2:2)

EXCURSUS: COMMUNITY IN CRISIS

- John’s church is embroiled in a heretical crisis. Some former members have deceived themselves and others that it is possible to “*not sin*” (v. 8). How is that possible? *It*

² *John* 1:4-5 In him was *life*, and the *life* was the light of men. The *light* shines in the *darkness*, and the *darkness* has not overcome it.

³ *Gen.* 1:3-5 And God said, “Let there be *light*”; and there was *light*. And God saw that *the light was good*; and God *separated the light from the darkness*. God called the *light* Day, and the *darkness* he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

⁴ *Gen.* 2:7 Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils *the breath of life*; and man became a living being (see: *Gen.* 3:20.)

⁵ *Isa.* 9:2 The people *who walked in darkness have seen a great light*; those who dwelt in a land of *deep darkness*, on them *has light shined* (see: *Isa.* 42:6-7).

isn't. It is a false and dangerous claim of this 'antichrist' group. There are various theories as to the roots of the problem.⁶ Regardless, the following seems likely:

- First, the community was established on the firm foundation of the Apostle himself.
- Second, sometime afterward, while the Apostle away, schismatic leaders, who left the church (or were excommunicated from it) established a heretical, “breakaway” community.
- Third, John writes and warns the church that such individuals “*went out from us*” (2:19) and are not loyal to Christ or His commandments, but embrace “another gospel” (see: *Gal. 1:7*). He refers to these troublemakers as the “antichrist” (See: *I John 2:18, 22; 4:3; II John 7*). They may be a “proto-gnostic” group, or at least, hold to a dualistic conception of reality (flesh = bad; spiritual soul = good). The theology of this antichrist group is highly flawed:
- Fourth, they specifically profess Christ (in some sense) but deny / diminish His incarnation (*I John 4:2*). They deny / diminish the necessity of the incarnate Christ, and in His place embrace an over-developed theology of the Holy Spirit.
- Fifth, above all, these heretical, “breakaway” leaders embraced a theology of “*Spirit-filled perfectionism*” which denied the possibility of sin. In a sense, it is as if Christ “delivered the gift of the Spirit” in His life and, having deposited this gift, returned to heaven and ceased to have ongoing importance. Having been “anointed” by / in the Spirit, they have reached an enlightened “*perfection*” (so they think) in which it is impossible for them to sin any longer. Now, the gift of the Spirit fills them and protects them from any sort of fleshly corruption of sin.
- Sixth, as a result, these heretics believe they do not need Christ or His sacraments, They do not hate Christ but are “anti-Christ” as they have no need of Him in their lives. They have the Spirit – this is all they need.
- Seventh, true “perfection,” John counters, comes not by *denying* the reality of sin, but by *growing in sanctity* by confessing one’s sins, renouncing sin, and keeping Christ’s commandments.
- Eighth and finally ... as always, a living, vibrant relationship with Christ—accessed through liturgy, the sacraments, Scripture and prayer—is *the path to spiritual success*. To deny the *necessity* of Christ’s Incarnation is to deny the necessity of these “staples” of the Christian life. To deny these staples as necessary for one’s spiritual growth is to deceive oneself and to deny Christ:

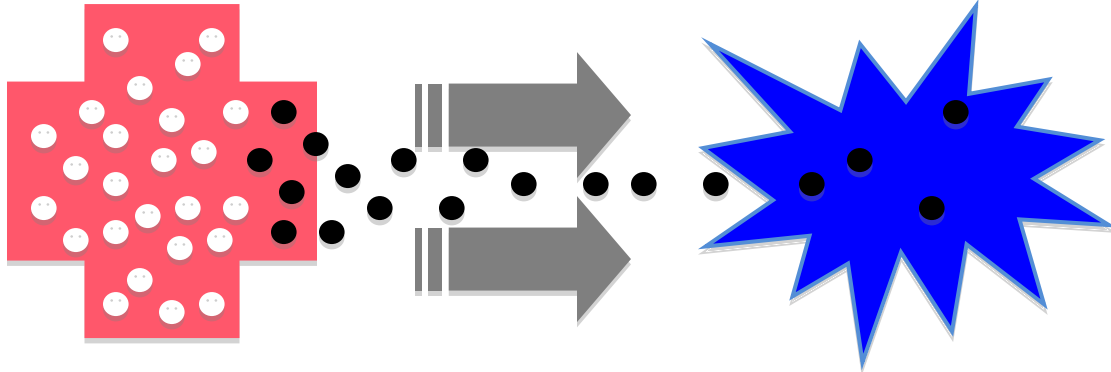
I John 2:4-6 He who says “*I know him*” but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and *the truth is not in him*; but whoever keeps his word, in him *truly love for God is perfected* [or, “*is being perfected*”]. By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which [Jesus] walked.

⁶ See Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*. New York: Paulist Press, 1979. Brown’s book is rather infamous in modern Johannine studies. In our view, his “four phase” model of the history of the community contains some valuable insights, yet it is also somewhat speculative in nature. Brown’s history of the community is sound only if his reading of the *Gospel of John* and *I John* is correct, i.e. if the so-called *Community of the Beloved Disciple* developed over some five decades in the manner that he envisions. Much of this hypothesis is derived from “source-critical” readings of these Johannine texts, which he believes emerged in four key phases.

A VISUAL OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN JOHN'S CHURCHES

Apostolic (Johannine) Church

Community of 'Anti Christ'



c. SECOND CONDITION: PRACTICE OBEDIENCE (2:3–11)

- v. 11 *HATES HIS BROTHER ...* Along with what was said above, John underscores the need for obedience, which leads to love and forgiveness. ‘Faith’ *without faithfulness* is no faith at all, and will not strengthen familial / brotherly bonds.

d. THIRD CONDITION: REJECT WORLDLINESS (2:12–17)

- v. 12 *YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN ...* Although John has warned the church about self-deception regarding sin(lessness), he underscores that *wherein they are indeed still sinners, Christ has forgiven – and will forgive their sins.*
- vv. 15-17 *LUST OF THE FLESH ... OF THE EYES / THE PRIDE OF LIFE ...* This is the same ‘*threefold temptation*’ which Adam & Eve experienced (*Gen. 3:6*⁷). Yet, whereas the first Adam (and Eve) gave into these lusts, Christ was faithful when Satan tempted Him in the wilderness (*Matt. 4:1-11*).
- The spiritual disciplines of *prayer, almsgiving* and *fasting* are ancient, trusted and true prescriptions for overcoming these temptations in the power of the Risen Christ, our Savior and model of holiness.

e. FOURTH CONDITION: KEEP THE FAITH (2:18–29)

- v. 18 *ANTICHRIST IS COMING/ HAS COME ...* The term antichrist does not occur in the *Book of Revelation* – but only here in *I John*. Antichrist(s) is a figure that leads others from Christ through a false type of ‘*anointing*’ (e.g., false teachings / practices).
- To counter this, John re-affirms the “anointing” the believers have *already received* from the Holy Spirit in Christian baptism (*I John 2:26*).
- v. 19 *WENT OUT FROM US ...* Greek: *prosago* – “progressed beyond (us).” Progress in the spiritual life is desirable—*provided it does not lead us to believe we can ‘advance’ beyond Christ and / or His Apostles.* Such “progress” was at the root of the above secessionist schism / heretical community that branched off from the apostolic Church.

⁷ *Gen. 3:6* So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate ...

- **v. 29 CONFIDENCE ... AT HIS COMING ...** In confronting these ecclesial problems, John is not attempting to *constrain* the faithful, but to *liberate* them from false freedoms and help them grow in confidence in being “approved by God.”

III. Live As Children of God (3:1–5:13)

A. GOD IS FATHER (3:1–3)

- **v. 1 FATHER / CHILDREN OF GOD ...** John repeatedly refers to the church as *teknia* (Greek: children) of God. Through the grace of baptism, they (we) have been adopted into the family of God, as His sons and daughters in Christ Jesus (see: *John* 1:12-13⁸).
- **v. 2 WE SHALL BE LIKE HIM ...** All of the faithful will one day see Christ as He really is (v. 2), i.e., in all of His Resurrected glory. John’s experience of Christ in the flesh (e.g. “we beheld Him” – *I John* 1:1-4; see: *John* 1:14, 17-18) awaits us, in the Resurrection. Not only Him, but the Blessed Trinity, as we will partake of the divine nature.

B. FIRST CONDITION FOR LIVING AS GOD’S CHILDREN: RENOUNCE SIN (3:4–9)

- **v. 4 GUILTY OF LAWLESSNESS ...** The view of the secessionists had appeal: one could be a ‘believer’ without fear of sinning. John’s rebuttal: *there is no easy way out, and that which sounds too good to be true probably is.*
- What the schismatics promised was mere illusion, i.e., a spiritual perfectionism, without the responsibility for one’s moral actions. This is not “sinlessness”—but self-deception.

C. SECOND CONDITION: BE OBEDIENT (3:10–24)

- **vv. 11-18 CAIN / HIS BROTHER ...** John draws on a classic scene in *Genesis* to drive home that hatred has no place in Christian community ... and is spiritual fratricide.
- **v. 16 BY THIS WE KNOW LOVE ...** Recalling Jesus’ words in the Upper Room,⁹ John explains that our love must be like Christ’s—self-gift, love to the full, even to death.
- **vv. 19-20 GREATER THAN OUR HEARTS ...** Difficult to translate. My alternative: *“By this we really know that we belong to the truth, and if our feelings persuade us otherwise, we will convince our hearts in front of Him, for God knows all and is mightier than our hearts.*
- **v. 24 HIS COMMANDMENTS ...** The continued emphasis on “keeping the commandments” is crucial to John’s theology. Joyful acceptance and faithfulness to His commandments signify love and loyalty to Christ Himself.

D. THIRD CONDITION: REJECT WORLDLINESS (4:1–6)

- **v. 1 TEST EVERY SPIRIT ...** Healthy Christians are prudent as to whom / what leads them. We must exercise spiritual discernment. John’s first criterion: all spiritual leaders / messages begin by confessing the Word Incarnate. This is the foundation of truth.

E. FOURTH CONDITION: BE LOVING (4:7–5:4)

- **v. 8 GOD IS LOVE ...** The Blessed Trinity is the essence of love: The Lover, the Beloved, Love.
- We can be assured that Christ lives in us if we love as God loves.
- C.S. Lewis wrote of the *Four Loves*:
 - i. *Storge* – Love of a mother for a child
 - ii. *Phileo* – Brotherly love

⁸ *John* 1:12-13 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

⁹ *John* 15:13 Greater love has no man than this, *that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

- iii. *Eros* – Love between a husband and wife
- iv. *Agape* – God’s selfless love
- Lewis also warned that we not “reverse” the sentence, i.e. *love is God*.
- *Agape* – God’s selfless love
- **v. 18 PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR ...** Growing in Christian charity has a direct correlation to our confidence / boldness in living – or the level to which fear *paralyzes us*.

F. FIFTH CONDITION: KEEP THE FAITH (5:5–12)

- **v. 6-8 WATER AND BLOOD ...** This refers to the earthly ministry of Jesus, which began with His baptism in the Jordan River and culminated in His ‘baptism of blood’ [CCC #463] at His crucifixion in Jerusalem.
- In parallel to this, John is pointing out that we are not simply “baptized” with water – but we are baptized into Christ’s death. Christ’s death gives the fullest meaning to Christian baptism... in Him we are buried / in Him we are raised.
- Moreover, the language of “blood” points beyond the sacrament of baptism to the regular reception of the Holy Eucharist ... something the heretics apparently left behind.

IV. CONCLUSION (5:13–21) CHRISTIAN CONFIDENCE

- **v. 14 ASK ANYTHING ...** Because we are children of God, we can and ought to pray boldly:
- **CCC 2737** “*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*” If we ask with a divided heart, we are “*adulterers*”; God cannot answer us, for he desires our well-being, our life. “*Or do you suppose that it is in vain that the scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us?’*” That our God is “*jealous*” for us is the sign of how true his love is. If we enter into the desire of his Spirit, we shall be heard.
- **v. 16 A SIN WHICH IS DEADLY ...**
 - **CCC #1854** Sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity. The distinction between mortal and venial sin, already evident in Scripture, became part of the tradition of the Church. It is corroborated by human experience.¹⁰
 - *** For more: see: CCC 1854–64**

FINAL WORDS: vv. 18-20 We know that any one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

¹⁰ **CCC 1855** *Mortal sin* destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him. *Venial sin* allows charity to subsist, even though it *offends and wounds it*. **CCC 1857** For a *sin* to be *mortal*, three conditions must together be met: “Mortal sin is sin: (i) whose object is grave matter and (ii) which is also committed with full knowledge and (iii) deliberate consent.