

1 John - Introduction

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[0 : 00] I want to open your Bibles to the book of 1 John. 1 John, if you're new to the Bible, that's going to be really close to the very, very end.

And don't turn too fast or you'll miss it. There's three letters that John wrote to local house churches, probably in the region of Ephesus. And today we start a 12-week series examining John's first letter, 1 John.

Now, the setting for this letter is important, but there's a bunch of other things I want you to kind of have a sense for. As we spend 12 weeks in 1 John, I thought it'd be good to give you a bit of an overview of what is actually happening in this letter.

So I've got five points for you this morning. The first is the setting of the letter. That's the problem that John is trying to solve. The second is the style.

John writes in a very unique style. We need to talk about that a little bit. The structure of the book. It appears initially that there is no structure, but as you look more carefully, you see it.

[1 : 07] The substance. What is the main idea that John is trying to communicate? And the solution. What is the main solution that John offers to the problem he is addressing?

In terms of the setting, it is about addressing a particular problem. John is trying to solve a particular problem that has been a problem in the Holy Land even before the time of Christ.

You may remember in Acts 5 that a wise old Pharisee named Gamaliel shows up in a critical moment. Christianity had just begun to grow to the extent that it became a threat to the ruling council.

And John and Peter, as its chief spokesmen, were arrested and brought before them and were supposed to be put to death. But Gamaliel, a Pharisee, said, you know, there have been so many other instances where a new savior arises and then over time it just comes to nothing.

Why don't we, instead of killing these men, just let this play out? It's probably just one more of the same kinds of deals. You see, the main issue that John is trying to deal with is something you see all throughout the early church and that we see today.

[2 : 23] There is a mass number of people who are imposters, specifically imposter leaders, imposter saviors, imposter apostles. And they're circulating around God's sheep and leading many astray.

There's, as I think we've talked about this a fair number of times, there's a letter called the Didache that was written. It's just the way, the practice of Christianity. It's very early on in Christianity.

It's probably late first century, early second century. And this letter contains all sorts of just practical advice to Christians navigating this new thing known as Christianity.

Listen to one excerpt from this document. Welcome every apostle who comes to you as the Lord, but he must not stay more than one day or two if necessary.

If he stays three days, he is a false prophet. When the apostle leaves, he should take nothing except bread until he finds his next lodging. If he asks for money, he is a false prophet.

[3 : 25] Not everyone who speaks in the spirit is a prophet, but only one who has the ways of the Lord. And by their conduct, the false prophet and the true prophet will be known.

Why am I reading that to you? Because even at the very beginning, as careful leaders are helping to guide Christians into truth, they are constantly having to contend with imposters, with counterfeits.

This is a super early problem. And Jesus even predicted this. In Matthew 24, Jesus says, See that no one leads you astray, for many will come in my name, saying that I am the Christ, and they will lead many astray.

So that's the problem John is trying to solve. All three letters are about this very issue. He's trying to help Christians discern between true and false Christian leaders and true and false Christians.

In 3 John, just to give you a sense of the whole series and how it all plays together, In 3 John, a guy has sort of taken over a house church, and he has begun to exercise authority he does not rightly possess.

[4 : 39] That's the reason 3 John is written. In 2 John, we have the problem mostly of deceptive teachers. That's why 2 John is written, mostly with deceptive teachers.

For instance, and it's only one chapter, 2 John, And in verse 7 of 2 John, he writes, If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greetings.

Sounds like the diadache, right? For whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. And in verse 18, or in verse 10, he actually says, For many deceivers have gone out into the world, and those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh, Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.

So 3 John, someone's taken over that shouldn't be in charge. 2 John, a bunch of teachers have entered in, leading people astray from Christ. 1 John, same basic idea.

In 1 John, we see things written like this. Chapter 2, verse 18. Children, it is the last hour. As you have heard, the antichrist is coming. So now many antichrists have come.

[5 : 52] Therefore, we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us. If they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out that it might become plain, that all are not of us.

Verse 26. 1 John chapter 2. I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you, but the anointing that you receive from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you.

But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and it is true, and it's no lie, just as it is taught you, abide in him. So that's the situation. That's what's going on.

That's why John is writing these three letters. Now let's just talk for a minute about the style. John, 1 John, John 17, the Gospel of John, these can be confusing for our Western linear minds.

We are used to a progression of ideas, A, B, C, D. maybe a syllogistic progression, if anything. But this approach to thinking is not the only way that people think.

[6 : 58] And in Semitic literature, they would do this thing where they would circle around an idea and dive back in and make another point about it, and then circle around and dive back in and make another point about it.

And that's what's known as amplification. That's what the technical term is. So when you're reading John 17, and Jesus just feels like he's saying something and going back and saying something again, or when you're reading the first letter of John, you're going to feel like, where are we going with this?

Well, that's a particular literary style, and the main thing you need to understand that he's doing is what you just might call differentiation. He's saying, this is what a Christian is, this is what a Christian is not.

Now, in terms of the structure of 1 John, you have two main sections. The first section is God is light, and that appears from chapter 1, verse 5, to chapter 3, verse 10.

And the second section, God is love, and there you've got from chapter 3, verse 11, almost to the end of the book, to 5, 17. So what John is doing here, he's doing the work of differentiation.

[8 : 11] He's helping people figure out what is a true Christian, leader, what is a false Christian leader, what is a true Christian, what is a false Christian. And he's doing that by saying, God is X, therefore you must be X.

If anyone is truly of God, they will act like God. So you begin to see this logic drop out of the passage. In this section where John says God is light, he says things like, verse 6, chapter 1, if we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie.

God is light. So if we walk in darkness, we're not walking with God. Chapter 2, verse 3, by this we know that we have come to know him if we keep his commandments.

Don't take part in unfruitful works of darkness, another apostle would say. God is light. We can show that we are walking with God by whether or not we obey him. Chapter 3, verse 9, no one born of God makes a practice of sinning.

So he's saying God is light, therefore these are the behaviors. And when he goes to the section where he says God is love, he does the same thing. Verse 14 of chapter 3, we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

[9 : 24] See how he's doing this? He's saying God is this thing, therefore true people of God will act this way. We tried to warm you up to this kind of thinking about a month ago when I preached two sermons from the Psalms.

God's personality, or what is God's personality and developing a godly personality. You just build it that way. The whole Christian life is built that way. Who is God?

What is he like? That tells me what I'm supposed to be like. That tells me where I'm supposed to be aiming. And that brings us to point number four, the substance of the letter. His main point in this letter can be referred to in different ways.

Philosophy talks about it one way. In rhetoric, there's a particular approach. But it's essentially, you could summarize it in two ways. If you want to sound fancy, the fancy way of saying this is ontological ethics.

Ontological ethics. And that's the idea of what you do proceeds out of what you are. What you do proceeds out of what you are. That's what ontological ethics are.

[10 : 31] A simpler way to say it is just, he's arguing from that well-understood concept of family resemblance. Children look like their parents. That's the basic argument.

And so if you are born of God, you will act like God. You will talk like God. You will think like God. And so on and so forth. That's the basic substance of the letter.

We should bear a family resemblance to the one who adopted us, to whom we were reborn, God of the universe, Jesus Christ. Now, the question becomes, okay, we're supposed to act like God.

What is God like? How do I know what God is like? And John offers an extremely elegant response to that in the first four verses, which is what we'll cover today.

The first four verses of 1 John. Look at chapter 1, verse 4, or chapter 1, verse 1. That which was from the beginning, you know, turn back to that phrase in a minute.

[11 : 33] That's an important phrase. Which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testified to it, and proclaimed to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

That which we have seen and heard, we also proclaim to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us. And indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.

And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. How does John know what God is like? He knows what God is like because he knows Jesus Christ.

That's the basic flow and argument of 1 John. People who are actually of God will act like God. Well, that's an extremely broad category full of tons of contamination.

So how do we communicate to the average person what God is like? Well, this is exactly why Jesus has come. To reveal the nature, essence, and glory of God living among us.

[12 : 50] John simply says, if you want to know what God is like, look to Christ. So I developed a slide just so, because I think 1 John lacks obvious form, I'm going out of my way to give you some handles for this passage.

And so there's a slide that just shows the logical flow of everything. It's a pyramid. of everything that John is trying to do. Number one, who is in and who is out?

Who's real? Who's fake? Number two, we can tell who's real through the argument of family resemblance. Point three, God is like this, so you should be like this.

True people of God are going to be like this. How do we know what God is like? We know what God is like because we know Christ. And Christ is the living God.

So this is his basic approach to the letter. And that's what he's starting with. He's making this key argument. I know Jesus. I know Jesus.

[13 : 51] And therefore, I am able to discern truth from error. Friends, what a gift to give another human being.

The ability to say that. I know Jesus. And therefore, I can discern between truth and error. You know what I discovered recently?

There's a lot of people in Asia. There's a lot of people in Asia. I don't know if you guys ever heard that. Wandering around the Hong Kong airport, trying not to look as hasty as I am.

Trying to pretend that I understand exactly what the little characters mean. But one thing, one thing that was inescapable about, that arrives to your mind when you're in such population density, almost no one here has the shepherd of their souls as their Lord and Savior.

Almost no one here knows Jesus. And therefore, almost no one here has the ability to discern truth from error in any meaningful way.

[15 : 12] It's just captivating when you drive through a town that in our world would hold a million people, but in their world holds ten.

It's not that it's more spread out, right? It's just that personal space has not been a priority in centuries. And you drive through such population density and you realize nobody here has the shepherd and so everybody here is being harassed and confused like sheep without a shepherd.

What a gift it is to give someone the truth about Jesus Christ so that through the truth about Jesus Christ, they can just be discerning.

They can just understand the world. It's a very confusing world full of so many lies. What a gift it is to give someone Christ. This is John's basic approach.

He can't just go person by person and saying, Ned's in, Bill's out. You know, that's not the way it works. He can't go through every potential contingency of every possible deceiver that could enter their life.

[16 : 25] He has to give them a tool. And that tool is, if you will study Christ, you will always be able to discern what is real and what is fake, what is true and what is false, what is light and what is darkness.

In fact, the writer of Hebrews argues, I think, that essentially, if you want to be mature and be able to discern through constant practice the difference between good and evil and not be fooled in various ways, you must move on from basic things and move on.

Move away from just basic rules. Give me advice for this particular situation. Give me advice for that particular situation. There's nothing wrong with that. But the real cure is a true knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Now, how do we apply this? Well, I think there's at least two applications for this whole letter in some ways and this four verses in another way.

And the first is this. We must not grow tolerant of those who tamper with the truth about Jesus Christ. We must not grow tolerant with those that tamper with the truth about Jesus Christ.

[17 : 43] Now, we are a gun-owning church. A lot of us own guns and it would not be unusual, for instance, if I had one of you over for dinner and before you sat down, you pulled out your Glock and set it on the table because uncomfortable to sit with and that would not feel odd in my home so long as I know you and I trust you.

And then I'd be like, well, you know, I'm fine. I trust this person with this gun. I'm going to tell you something. Anybody, anybody who endeavors to tell you what Jesus is like, including me, they are holding a loaded gun.

They can do incredible damage to you. Anybody who tells you what Jesus is like needs to be vetted in a way that is extremely thoughtful.

You see, the truth is is that not everybody should have that voice in your life. Not every writer who writes a book about Jesus deserves to have the voice in your life that tells you what Jesus is like.

Not every online personality is trustworthy with that loaded gun. I'm telling you, if you can change, if I can change your view of Jesus, I can change your whole life, your whole trajectory, your whole capacity to discern true and false.

[19 : 12] So what you'll notice in the culture, and this has been going on since the time of Jesus, is that many come in his name attempting to modify the true person of Jesus Christ in various ways.

And they're doing that because if you can pull that foundation out from someone, they are easily manipulatable, they're easily coerced, they're easily scared, they're easily deceived.

So never, never be casual, never be casual around someone who is telling you what Jesus is like. Make sure you think of them as a person with a gun and you say, well, what I, whether I listen to this person or not depends a great deal on what I know about this person.

Be extremely cautious about receiving new data about Jesus Christ. We'll get to that in a moment. In the Psalm, Psalm 1, blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.

There's obviously all kinds of scoffers you could sit with, but I'm going to tell you the most dangerous ones are those who would tamper with the truth about who Jesus is. Now, let me just explain for a second why people keep tampering with the basic nature of Jesus.

[20 : 37] You remember that scene from Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe where the Pevensies have to decide if Aslan is safe or not? And the beaver says, oh, well, no, I mean, he's not safe.

He's good, but he's not safe. Friends, almost all the Jesus tampering you'll encounter in your life is done by people who are trying to make the mighty Jesus safe around their particular sin.

They are simply trying to pull the claws out of Aslan, take the roar out of his throat, and make him a domesticated Christ, useful for their purposes.

Let me just give you some examples of ways that people tamper with the truth about Jesus. You'll recognize all of these. You have the selectively quoted Jesus.

Well, Jesus never preached. He preached love, not judgment. You have Jesus who was all about inclusion, the selectively quoted Jesus. You have the social justice Jesus. Jesus was a revolutionary socialist who hated the rich.

[21 : 39] You have the self-help Jesus. Jesus wants you to live your best life. You have the spiritual mascot Jesus. Jesus was basically just an avatar for a great truth, and he is a representative just like Buddha or so on and so forth.

You have the conveniently silent Jesus. Jesus never said anything about my pet sin. You have the scripturally separated Jesus. Jesus is not like the God of the Old Testament.

He is completely different. That's not him speaking there. The Old Testament is harsh and judgmental, but Jesus came to replace all of that. You can see how many deceivers have gone into the world, and their main approach, if they're smart, is to disfigure Christ in such a way as to give permission for their particular sins or agendas.

That's why I'm telling you, out of sincere love and care for your souls, that you need to be very wise about who you allow the permission to tell you about who Jesus is.

I think this is especially true in Christian books. Just be exceedingly careful. I just, I started to read a book. I won't get into it. It's, the book itself is very popular.

[22 : 55] It's a book on the ruthless elimination of hurry or something like that. I'm all for chilling out. I'm all for being, being careful and being patient and slowing down and smelling the roses.

I'm all for those things. I'm not trying to defend hurry. But the book is absolutely one of those books you just wouldn't, you just want to set down because what he does is he selectively paints a picture of Jesus who was not consistent with the biblical Jesus.

The biblical Jesus was not someone who was exceedingly rested or restful. And yet he's presented that way in the book. It's all too easy for people who are trying to prove their point to disfigure Christ in a particular way.

And I just want you to be super, super sensitive to that fact. The truth is that only through knowing the true Christ do you have any shot at truly discerning right from wrong, good from evil, true Christian from false Christian.

Okay, that's the first application. Second, this is the, this is the big one, friends. Don't get bored with that which you have had from the beginning.

[24 : 08] Don't get bored with the thing you've had from the beginning. That's an easy thing to understand, right? We almost always assume the things that have long been true in our life.

We almost always take them for granted. And one of the central issues for why so many Christians are deceived, so why so many Christians plunge into the charismatic chaos of an IHOP or so forth is that people get bored with Jesus.

They think that the new thing, the new thing plus Jesus is the way we need to go. We need, we need sights and smells and bells and whistles.

We need fresh revelation and so on and so forth. And John's whole argument here is, you know why you can trust me? Because I haven't changed my message at all. The word beginning is key to this book.

It begins in verse 1. That which we have known from the beginning, that which was from the beginning. In chapter 2, verse 7, beloved, I'm writing you no new commandment but an old commandment.

[25 : 17] John 2, 1 John 2, 13, I write to you fathers because you have known him who is from the beginning. 1 John 2, 14, I write to you, I write to you, no, sorry, that's the same one.

1 John 2, 24, let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father.

Over and over again in 1 John, he says, go back to the thing that is at the beginning. And what we see as Christians is, and friends, I could use like really extreme examples, I almost promise you, I almost promise you that your love has grown cold.

That I can almost promise you that at some point, if not now, recently, you were indeed bored with that which was from the beginning. Friends, I can almost promise that you think at some level that that's understood, Jesus is understood, I've got that figured out, now let's move on to things that are new and interesting or novel.

And that is the gateway through which deceivers enter. The gateway through which deceivers enter, the average Christian's life, is through a boredom with the basics and a desire to be tentilated with something new.

[26 : 44] I look at all of these people who have been caught up in terrible church movements full of deception, immorality, and so forth, and I feel for them at one level, but I also want to tell them, listen, if you weren't so insistent on a smoke machine, if you weren't so insistent on sensuality in your worship, you would have never been there in the first place.

The reality is is that many people are led astray not because some false apostle jumps on their back and steers them in some direction, but because that individual Christian thinks there must be something more than Jesus.

And there isn't. Do not get bored with that which you have had from the beginning. I can promise you that you have not learned all there is to learn about Jesus.

I can promise you that you have not loved all there is to love about Jesus. I can promise you that you have not lived out all that there is to live out in response to Jesus.

And I can certainly promise you as the apostle Paul says to himself that you have not yet laid hold of all that Jesus has for you to lay hold of.

[27 : 58] Be very careful about allowing boredom with the beginning to open up your heart into all sorts of deception. So that's really the message.

Let's start wrapping some of this up. Earlier this week, J.D. Vance looked straight into the camera and cited a particular part of the Nicene Creed. Jesus is the only son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same essence as the Father.

Now, you know that I follow politics my whole life. I've been a guy engaged in that world for a very long time. I've never seen as much gospel proclamation coming out of official offices at various levels of government than I'm seeing right now.

I want to give you my conspiracy theory. It's a positive one. I believe that a certain number of key leaders in this country have recognized what has been said for a long time is absolutely true.

In this country, we will either have Christ or we will have chaos. I believe, actually, that I think I witnessed good old Catholic J.D. attempting a national exorcism on TV.

[29 : 20] I'm actually serious. I think that a bunch of leaders have the sense that there has been a kind of demonic bitterness and demonic grievance and demonic separation that has taken over our country.

And these invocations of Christ's name are not merely to stick it to the lips. There's a spiritual battle happening and some of our political leaders are aware of this fact and are beginning to say, that's enough.

Christ, Christ, Christ. Because only Christ can still certain kinds of storms. And I think there is a renewed national desperation to move past all of the egalitarianism and tolerance for tolerance sake because we understand our time is short.

The waters are far too rough. We will not last much longer. And so a group of people, a group of leaders, have determined it is time to be clear.

It is either Christ or it is chaos. Friends, we will not find unity as a nation or as a church through tolerance.

[30 : 41] We will find it through truth, specifically the truth. The way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is and always has been the centering person for Western civilization.

And people are realizing that he is holding down some very important and very dangerous things underneath his throne. And we are desperate to say, dear Jesus, please, please, lead us to repentance.

Please, let us honor you in our land. And I am so excited beyond all measure to see that, but boy, I'll tell you something straight up.

I know so many Christians who don't have Jesus at the center of their life. And it's absolutely easier, absolutely easier to think that the solution lies at a level that is beyond your personal responsibility tomorrow to wake up and say, all of life for all of Christ, Monday.

Are my thoughts like Jesus' thoughts? Are my feelings like Jesus' feelings? Are my desires like Jesus' desires? Are my words like Jesus' words? Because let me just tell you the truth.

[32 : 02] I hope we have some kind of national exorcism. I really do. But I just want to be clear. Your own internal world is chaotic without Christ keeping it all together.

The unity you need as an individual where your passions and your desires and your thoughts and your actions all align in one particular direction, that is a unity that can only come when you center everything in you around the truth that we have had from the beginning.

Jesus Christ is God of God. That he has come to save and direct us. So the reality is this phrase, Christ or chaos, it gets applied at the national level.

But I'll tell you something, moms, dads, it is absolutely true of your home. Try it. No, please don't try it. Please don't try it. If you do not center your home around Christ, you will have chaos.

And that is not only true of your home, that is true of your heart. And so the solution to all of our problems really is to hold fast to that which we've had from the beginning.

[33 : 18] What John heard and saw with his own eyes, he looked upon and touched with his own hands. Let's pivot into preparation for communion.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands. Hands with nails having been freshly driven through them.

This body that John is seeing, this incarnate Godhead, this incarnate member of the Godhead that John is hearing and touching and seeing, the reason that he was visible, the ultimate reason he was visible, the ultimate reason he was touchable was to offer his body on a cross, shedding righteous, cleansing blood to make it possible for each one of us to be not only forgiven, but also to be born again and bear that family resemblance.

John says in these first four verses, I want you to share in fellowship with us. The Lord's table has historically been understood to be the sharing.

The Lord's table has historically been called the sharing. It's a different word that's used, a Latin word, or a Greek word, but the sharing is the idea. It's the fellowship. So today we have before us the thing Jesus gave us to remember that he is the centerpiece of everything and that he came to offer himself for our, not only forgiveness, but for our adoption so that we could bear that family resemblance.

[35 : 04] So if you're here today, whether you're a member of Providence or not, we are going to partake in the Lord's table in a moment and I want you to come and say, Jesus, I know it is you or chaos.

I know it's you or chaos in my heart. I know it's you or chaos in my home. I know it's you or chaos in my church and it's you or chaos in my nation. Today I receive this table as your promise that you'll never leave or forsake me and that you'll carry what you started all the way to completion.

So let me pray and then you come and get the elements. We'll partake together. Father God, we praise your holy name for being so good to us that while we were still sinners, you demonstrated your own love in giving us your only begotten son to be crucified on a cross to bear the full weight of your wrath against our sin and to make us new people in him.

Jesus, you've promised that you make all things new. The word says that anyone who's in Christ is a new creation. The old is past and the new has come. As we examine this book over the next 12 or 11 weeks now, Lord, would you please help us to constantly be looking to Jesus and asking, is my life becoming increasingly like his?

Is my mind becoming increasingly like his? Is my heart becoming increasingly like his? And all the way as we challenge ourselves and we dive right into the exhortations and admonishments found in this letter, we'll end every single week by remembering we don't earn our salvation.

[36 : 38] Our salvation is given to us by grace without works lest any man should boast and we'll end every single week the same way, Lord, celebrating what you have said on the cross that it is finished, our sins are paid for, and now we can walk with you in love, leaning into and learning from you.

We praise your holy name for what you've done. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.