



1 John Outlines and Study Questions

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What can John's first letter (1 John) teach us?

John gives three reasons for writing his letter to the churches: to complete our joy (1:4), to promote holiness (2:1), and to build up confidence in the truths of Christianity (5:13). He writes against false prophets, deceivers, and antichrists that have divided the church, leaving it uncertain about how to live and what to believe anymore. John wants to teach us how to be discerning of two things: first, not to be in denial about the basic human struggle he calls sin; and second, to realise that much of what is called religion and spirituality may actually harm us. John wants us to learn how to discern spiritual error from spiritual truth—insight we still need in our day.

There are three errors John highlights:

1. The theological error of denying that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God—God in flesh.
2. The ethical error of being overly optimistic about human nature—denying our sin.
3. The error of lovelessness in how we treat ourselves and our neighbours—denying God's character.

On this last point, John notes that since God has shown us what love means in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we demonstrate we know God by becoming like him (3:1-3).

It is moving that John, at three points, tells us how to encourage our hearts when we feel at our weakest—when our conscience condemns us, when our struggle against sin seems too difficult, and when the voices speaking against biblical Christian belief and action are in the majority. It is a deeply pastoral letter written to a church broken by division and confused by sophisticated heresies.

The fourth-century theologian, Jerome, passes on a story about John's ongoing pastoral care in Jerome's commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians. Jerome writes that while John was in frail old age at Ephesus, "He used to be carried into the congregation in the arms of his disciples and was unable to say anything except: 'Little children, love one another.' At last, wearied that he always spoke the same words, they asked: 'Master, why do you always say this?' 'Because,' he replied, 'it is the Lord's command, and if this is done, it is enough.'"

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This booklet has 12 studies for individuals and small groups. In each study, there is a brief outline of talks on each passage that highlight the parts of John's thought. This is followed by questions to prompt deeper investigation into the text of 1 John, and help us to reflect on our own lives.

For a deeper dive, the commentaries of John Stott, David Jackman, and Colin Kruse on 1 John are accessible, practical, and pastoral resources.

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1 John 1:1-10 | Christian certainty

The tests of true Christianity

- What, according to most people, are the signs of true Christianity?

The certainties we invent

- What certainties in our thinking, institutions, and habits do we rely on?

The certainty God offers us (1-4)

Denying ourselves joy by denying our wrongs (5-10)

- Why do we make God a liar when we deny the reality of our wrongs?

We write this to make your joy complete

For further thought

1. What reasons does John give for writing this letter in his first chapter?
2. Compare these reasons with the purpose of the Gospel of John (John 20:30-31).
3. What is the basis of Christian certainty according to John (1-4)?
4. Sin is denied in this chapter in three ways. What are those ways and what does John say are the consequences of denying our human capacity for wrong (5-10)?
5. Does John expect Christians to be perfect or repentant (2:1,2)?

1 John 2:1-6 | Knowing God

Do not sin, but if you do ... (1-2)

Knowing God (3-6)

For further thought

1. Does John expect Christian perfection in this life?
2. In Chapter 1 the Christian is the one who does not deny the reality of sin in the world in his or her life. Why then do we sometimes expect Christian perfection?
3. Why is it the more we walk in the light, the greater our awareness of sin in ourselves becomes?
4. The sin spoken of here is not an ongoing 'lifestyle' (habitual living) in sin that John speaks of later (3:6, 9 where the tense in the original implies he is talking about habitual and continuing sin); here John writes of occasional stumbling in sin that is then repented of. How would you apply these verses pastorally to: A couple who were unmarried but living together and started attending church? A Christian whose conscience still troubles him/her a great deal?
5. In verse 2 the sacrifice is offered by God (not by us) out of love (not out of reluctance), to appease God's justice (not ours!). Why is the sacrifice of Christ always relevant?
6. Some have said it is wrong for the innocent to willingly die for the guilty but John calls this love (4:9-11). How does this sacrifice differ from any sacrifice/obedience we could offer?
7. If a restored relationship with God is available in Christ to everyone, is that the same as saying everyone is therefore saved? What is implied by John's word, confess?

1 John 2:7-17 | The old is new

The old and new commandment to love (7-11)

Love and life (12-14)

Do not love the world (15-17)

For further thought

To derail trust in God, we simply present a new thing to trust in. This sales pitch will be very effective in our time because we have been trained to expect that 'new' means more up-to-date, relevant, faster, affordable, and generally better. John tells us that at each stage of life, the commandment to love in the way Jesus showed love is always new and challenging.

1. Some want to move on from the teaching of Christ and his apostles (summarised by the old yet new command to 'love as I loved you'—see John 13.31-35), yet rather than move beyond that teaching, John wants us to move deeper into it. Why?
2. Why does God's light (light reveals, it lets us see and understand. See 1:5-7) and our response of love go together in verses 8 to 11?
3. We have a saying that love is blind, but John insists that hate is blind. Why?
4. In verses 12 to 14, John reminds us that our sins are forgiven on account of Christ's name. He then applies this teaching to three stages of life: 1) To those at the outset of life; 2) To those in the prime of life; and 3) To the elders. How does the new but old command to love vary at different times of our lives? Why are we told to keep on growing like this?
5. In verses 15 to 17, John describes the competing love that denies the love of Christ. It has three characteristics: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. What do these look like in our world and in our lives?
6. Why does love for the world diminish love for our brothers and sisters in Christ?
7. If this competing love is common in our lives and churches, is it destructive?
8. What would it mean for our churches to do the will of God (verse 17)?

1 John 2:18-29 | Division

They did not really belong to us (18-19)

Because they deny that Jesus is the Christ (20-23)

And no one who denies the Son has the Father (24-25)

So, just as you were taught, remain in him (26-29)

For further thought

1. How does John define those who are antichrists in verses 20-23? What is the effect of their beliefs according to verse 23?
2. You may like to look up the following passages about the antichrist (the man of lawlessness): 2 Thessalonians 2:3-5, Matthew 7:15-23; 24, Mark 13, Revelation 12-13. What distinguishes the antichrist from the antichrists who have gone out into the world (2:18 and 4:3)? What do they have in common?
3. Ever since Christ has been revealed (1:1-4), we have been living in the last hour, and the evil one has sent antichrists into the world whose purpose is either to disguise/obscure the truth about Christ or to provide false Christs (2:18-19). Their purpose, whether they know it or not, is to lead many astray and to divide the church. Is division in the church always wrong?
4. John is not writing because his readers need to learn the first things about Christianity. He is writing to remind them that Jesus is the Christ (1:1-4). How do different explanations of Jesus today deny the Father and the Son (see 2:22)? What is left of our knowledge or experience of God if we accept this thinking? What is the ultimate cost (2:25)?
5. John says that his readers need no new teachers/teaching but just to remain in what they have (2:27). Why is it important to see that the truths of the Christian faith remain in us according to verses 28 and 29? Our culture says we always need to look to what is new. How can we counter this impulse, and remain faithful to the apostle's teaching about Jesus?
6. How does the vine image Jesus uses in John 15, or the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, help us to understand this passage?

1 John 3:1-10 | Doing right

See what great love the Father has lavished on us; we are children of God (1-3)

So no one who lives in him should keep on sinning (4-6)

For anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child (7-10)

For further thought

1. John is stunned (even towards the end of his life) at the effects of the gospel. What type of love does John describe in verse 1? What is done for us, and what is the outcome? (Verse 1)
2. What does it mean to purify ourselves in verse 3?
3. Why does John define sin as lawlessness in verse 4?
4. Why do we need the reminder that: he who does what is right is righteous in verse 7?
5. How did Jesus destroy the devil's work (verse 8) and why, according to this passage, is that work still seen in this world?
6. What are we to do with the devil's work in our own lives according to verse 9?
7. What are we to do when we fail? (2:1-6)

1 John 3:11-24 | Love

Black, white, and grey hats

Love one another (11-18)

- don't be like Cain (11-15)

- but do what love is (16-18)

For this is how we set our hearts at rest (18-20)

And so we have confidence before God... (21-24)

For further thought

1. In a world that is morally uncertain, it is hard to decide who are the good, the bad, or the good-bad, or even the bad-good guys. It all leaves us unsure, especially about ourselves! John writes to a church that is uncertain in what it believes, how to live, and the meaning of love. He points out that the pattern of abusing relationships is an ancient one—Cain was a brilliant man who took away life in the service of himself. Jesus gave up his life in the service of others. John asks an uncertain church to calm their hearts by gathering up the evidence of God's practical love at work in their lives, the evidence of answered prayer, and the experience of the Holy Spirit, to put to rest the accusations around and within them.
2. What are the two attitudes that enable us to distinguish between the children of God and the children of the devil in verses 11-15?
3. Why does the world hate those who love sacrificially as God did in Jesus?
4. The story of Cain is told in Genesis chapter 4. We learn that he is a clever, sensitive, and tormented man—there is a great deal in which we might sympathise with him—yet what is the difference between Cain and Jesus that ultimately John sees as condemning Cain?
5. How does Jesus' example motivate us to love in action and truth?
6. Why do we sometimes doubt that we have gotten anywhere in the Christian life? According to verses 19-22, how can we have confidence before God?
7. From verses 19-24, what are the external evidence and internal experience that we can use to give our hearts confidence before God?

1 John 4:1-6 | Test the spirits

Test the spirits (1-2)

Recognise the spirit of antichrist (3)

The one in you is greater than the one in the world (4)

Two spirits: of falsehood and truth (5-6)

For further thought

1. In what ways are we prone to spiritual deception in our day?
2. What are some examples of spiritual deception?
3. What is the test that distinguishes the spirit of God from the spirit of antichrist?
4. Why is this test of spirituality an objective test?
5. Why can't this test be isolated from the other tests of Christianity that John has already spoken of?
6. Read John 8:12-59 and reflect on Jesus challenging the Pharisees of his day. Does Jesus apply the same test to the Pharisees and teachers of the law that John asks us to apply here?
7. When we look at the world, we see a diversity of beliefs and ideas, but John tells us that there are only two. Why is John's conviction the outcome of chapter 1:1-4? What does this mean for the religions and ideals of our world?
8. How have believers overcome false prophets in the past?
9. What most attracts you to the views/beliefs of the world?

1 John 4:7-12 | When love is not love

When love is not love (our experiences of love)

Everyone who loves has been born of God (7-8)

This is how we know what love is (9-10)

Therefore, make God's love complete (11-12)

For further thought

Love is our most powerful and most abused four-letter word. The poet W. H. Auden, in his famous poem about love, wrote: 'Law like love, I say. Like law, we often weep, like law, we seldom keep.' In other words, our love is often uncertain, frail, and sometimes even a version of abuse. But the love that John carefully describes is a sacrifice of atonement that destroys punishment and fulfils the law. It is love that is given even when we didn't want it, even while we were unlovely and deserved justice rather than mercy. It is love that sees us as we are, at our best and worst, and sacrifices for us—instead of us—anyway. What God means by love is having our lawgiver and lover die in our place. This version of love is not an abuse of love—it goes deeper than death to heal us.

1. What do you mean by the word love? How do you know that this is what love means to you?
2. From these verses, what does God mean by love? How does it compare to what you feel love is?
3. In verses 11-12, why is what God means by love, lived out in our lives, evidence for Christianity?
4. Why is Christ our model to imitate in love?

1 John 4:13-21 | Love, truth, and fear

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us (13-16)

This is how love is made complete in us (17-18)

We love because he first loved us (19-21)

For further thought

1. As Christians, we sometimes doubt the reality of God's work in our lives, so John gives us five pieces of evidence as assurance—the first is the experience of the Spirit of God. Can you read through this letter again and list what are the signs of the Spirit of work in someone's life?

2. How does the apostles' testimony (4:14) assure us? Why does the Spirit of God take us to the apostles' teaching?

3. What other assurance of God's work in our lives does verse 4:15 give us?

4. How does a relationship with God now give us confidence for the day of judgement (4:17)?

What do we fear, and why is fear related to judgement? Do you know examples of love lessening fear?

5. This passage has been about making the invisible God seen in the love we share as we live in him. Why is this love outward and practical, and not only contemplative or emotional? How does the evidence of love in us assure and challenge us at the same time?

1 John 5:1-12 | Truth, love and obedience

Truth, love, and obedience (1-5)

- How to overcome

Water, blood, and Spirit (6-9)

God gave us life, and life is in the Son (10-12)

For further thought

1. The evidence of true Christian commitment is truth, love, and obedience (1,2). How do they work together in verses 1-5?

2. Re-read 2:15-17 to remind you of what John means by the world. What does it mean for us to overcome the world? Where do you need to overcome the world in your own life or in your church? How does John say we can do this?

3. Verse 5 helps explain verse 6. The place where Jesus is declared to be the Son of God is at his baptism (the water). The place where Jesus is associated with blood is, of course, the cross. How does the water explain the significance of the blood as a witness to what God has done for us in Jesus?

4. What are the signs in 1 John of the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit of God?

1 John 5:13-21 | Keep yourself from idols

I write these things ... so you may know you have eternal life (13-15)

- confidence in prayer

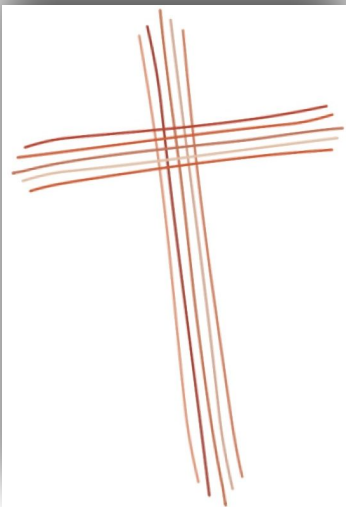
For anyone born of God does not continue to sin ... but God keeps them safe (16-18)

- praying about sin in our lives

We know we are born of God ... dear children, keep yourselves from idols (19-21)

For further thought

1. Why does John want us to know that we have eternal life?
2. If a sign of eternal life is our confidence in prayer (5:14), what sort of prayers can we be confident about?
3. Thinking about the themes of sin and forgiveness in the rest of this short letter, how do you understand verses 16 and 17?
4. In verse 18, how does the one who was born of God (i.e. Jesus) keep us safe from the harm of the evil one in this letter?
5. Verse 20 repeats the claims of 1:1-4. Why does John finish this letter where he began it?
6. In verse 21, we are warned to keep ourselves from idols, but John is not referring to statues. What are the idols (false spiritual influences, claims of divinity, and certainty) that God has been warning us about in this letter? How does this help us to remain in eternal life (verse 13)?



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