

Important Themes in 1 John



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 5:13, John 14:6, Eph. 4:25–5:21, 1 Tim. 3:15, 1 John.*

Memory Text: “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (*1 John 3:2, NASB*).

Of all the tragedy that came out of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., there was one positive development: for many people it sounded the death knell for moral relativism. The cold-blooded slaughter of thousands, in broad daylight, right on our TV sets, brought home for many people in real time the horror involved in such mass murder. It was suddenly obvious that evil like this could never be justified on the basis of culture. On September 11, people saw the face of a moral evil, an evil that transcended all culture, all traditions, all epochs; and suddenly for many the objective nature of morality, particularly of evil, finally hit home as never before.

Of course, for John, moral relativity was never an issue. He knew that there was absolute truth, and it was centered in Christ. This week we'll review some of the major themes of 1 John, including His understanding of the nature of truth, which always forms the foundation of morality.

The Week at a Glance: What does John teach us about the work of the Godhead? What images does he use to convey the idea of what the church should be like? What is the only basis of our salvation? What does John teach about truth?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 12.*

The Godhead

In 1 John, we are given a glimpse of the Godhead: the Father (*1 John 2:16*), the Son (*vs. 23*), and the Holy Spirit (*1 John 5:6*). The main emphasis, however, is on Jesus and the Father. The letter tells us that God is light and that darkness (evil) is not found in Him. It tells us that God is righteous and that He is love. Indeed, our ability to love is dependent on the God who is love. God's relationship to the believers is expressed with the term *children*, which itself reveals the love and care He has for us. In short, 1 John paints for us a very positive and hopeful picture of what our God is like.

But the chapter also tells us something else. It tells us what the Lord is doing for us. Here's where our real hope and encouragement should lie.

According to 1 John, what has God done for us, and what is being done now for us?

1 John 1:9 _____

1 John 2:1, 2 _____

1 John 2:27 _____

1 John 3:8 _____

1 John 4:8–10 _____

1 John 5:11 _____

1 John 5:14 _____

The letter refers to Christ's coming in human flesh, as well as His death for us, which offers us the opportunity to have eternal life. At the same time, His death defeated the works of the devil, our enemy. According to 1 John, God forgives our sins, cleanses us, intercedes for us, and gives us eternal life. He offers us assurance and makes us His children. The bottom line is that it is the Cross and the blood of Jesus alone that saves us, nothing else.

Are there any areas of your life that you have not fully surrendered to the Lord? That is, are you doing things that you know, deep down, are wrong and yet haven't given up? If so, in the end only you can make the choice to give it up. If the Spirit is touching you, why not make the choice now? The longer you wait, the harder it gets.

The Church

In the New Testament the church is presented with a number of images such as salt (*Matt. 5:13*), a pillar (*1 Tim. 3:15*), a building or house (*Eph. 2:21, 22*), a temple (*1 Cor. 3:16, 17*), a mother (*Rev. 12:1, 2*), a bride (*Rev. 21:2*), and Christ's body (*Eph. 1:22, 23*).

In 1 John, though the word *church* itself does not appear, the concept does. What imagery is found in the book that better helps us understand what the church should be all about?

1 John 2:9–11 _____

1 John 2:13, 14 _____

1 John 2:12, 18 _____

1 John 3:1 _____

In 1 John it seems that the church primarily is portrayed as a family. There is the heavenly Father (12 times). In addition, John himself is a father figure of sorts, calling the church members “little children” (*1 John 2:18*). The church members are “children” (13 times), “fathers and young men” (each twice), and “brothers” (13 times).

These terms imply a certain kind of intimacy, a close relationship and love for each other, and contain the notion of belonging together. Everyone is needed, and everyone has a place in God's family. In addition, this family includes the Godhead. Consequently, this community has a horizontal and a vertical dimension. As members of the church, we are literally part of the family of God.

“Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God” (*1 John 4:7*). **How does this text reflect the key to what it means to be part of God's church?**

How would you describe your relationship to the church family? Are you a wayward child? Domineering father? Loving mother? Helpless babe? What changes do you need to make in order to be a more productive part of this special family?

Salvation

The Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is all about Jesus. But not about Jesus in a vacuum. It's about Jesus and Redemption. It's about what God has done in behalf of the fallen race. It's about the amazing self-sacrifice of God Himself in order to restore us to what we were originally given, and even more.

In short, the Bible is about salvation, and that's a key theme in 1 John, as well.

According to the following texts, how are we given salvation?

1 John 1:9 _____

1 John 2:2 _____

1 John 4:9, 10 _____

The means of our salvation is Christ's blood (1 John 1:7; 5:6, 8); that is, His atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:2, 4:10). The Cross is not mentioned in 1 John directly. However, blood and atoning sacrifice point to the Cross. *It is not the example of Jesus that saves us, as important as that is. It is His death.* And yet, His example calls us to walk as He did (1 John 2:6).

For John, the salvation of the believers is a present reality. He describes it in various ways:

- They have come to know Him (1 John 2:2, 3).
- They are in Him (1 John 2:5, 5:20).
- Their sins have been forgiven (1 John 2:12).
- They have overcome the evil one (vs. 13).
- They have passed from death to life (1 John 3:14).
- They have eternal life (1 John 5:12, 13).

This is a wonderful portrayal of what salvation is all about.

Considering the great promises and hope that we have in Jesus, what more could you do in order to reach more people with the good news? What sacrifices are you willing to make in order to give others the opportunity to know Jesus and His salvation?

Christian Behavior

Although John in his first letter deals with erroneous theology, he again and again deals with ethics. John clearly sees that theology informs ethics and that a wrong theology can lead to wrong actions. Hence, it's important to be as correct in our theology as possible. A wrong understanding, for instance, of the law and grace has caused untold millions to trample on God's Sabbath day. Thus, we must make sure that our theological understanding of God and Scripture is mature, growing, and correct.

We also must make sure that our theology correctly translates into practice. It is sad to see someone, a great defender of orthodox theology, run away with his neighbor's spouse. It is tragic for theology majors and seminarians to cheat on their exams. It is lamentable when Sabbath keepers who know the truth about salvation, the heavenly sanctuary, and the state of the dead nevertheless lie to each other.

Review the following texts and on the lines below summarize what they teach us about ethical behavior. *1 John 1:7; 2:1, 15, 16; 3:4, 7, 15, 17, 18; 4:7; 5:2, 3.*

John stresses ethical behavior with direct and indirect appeals. He calls for Christians not to lie, not to sin, not to hate brother or sister, not to love the world with its lusts and boastful pride, and not to practice lawlessness. Instead, he says that we must be obedient, do what is right, and love each other in a tangible way. Although Paul is more detailed than John (*see, for example, Eph. 4:25–5:21*), John has summarized all of this when he points to keeping God's commandments and walking as Jesus walked and lived (*1 John 2:6*).

John makes it clear that to be born of God, to know God, to love God, is something that will change our lives. For John, truth isn't just something believed; it is something lived out. Perhaps no verse says it clearer than *1 John 3:7*: "Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous."

How are we to walk and live as Jesus lived? What does that mean on a practical and daily basis? Are you facing something right now, perhaps, that will require a lot of grace and strength to act as Christ would act?

Truth and Lies

From the time of the ancient Greeks through even today, there has been the notion that truth is relative, that there are no absolutes, and that human beings, far from having some transcendent absolute standard to guide them and their actions, pretty much have to decide for themselves what is truth and what is error, what is good and what is bad, what is moral and what is immoral. It's known basically as relativism, and though it comes in various guises, the basic point is the same: There is no absolute standard of truth, goodness, or morality. In this view, we have to come up with these things ourselves—doing the best we can according to our own culture, community, and traditions.

Read John 14:6. What is Jesus saying here about the nature of absolute truth?

Jesus doesn't accept the idea that truth is relative. In words as clear and unambiguous as possible, Jesus shows us the reality of absolute truth, and in Him we see it manifested in the form of a person!

What does John teach about truth? *1 John 2:4, 21; 3:19; 4:6; 5:20.*

John knows that there are absolutes; more so, he makes it very clear that there is a sharp distinction between truth and lies, a contrast that tends to be blurred in relativistic worldviews. There is absolute truth. God is true. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are truth. On the other hand, a liar is a person who makes unsubstantiated claims, who confesses to love and does not keep the commandments, and who denies that Jesus is the Christ. In contrast, sincere Christians know the truth, love the truth, and belong to the truth. Thus, truth is both what we intellectually grasp and what we practice.

No question: according to the Bible, absolute truth exists. But is everything absolute? Are there not things that are not so firm, but rather contingent, personal, cultural, and changing? How can we learn to differentiate between what must be absolute and unchanging and what can change and be relative, depending on circumstances?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “A Faithful Witness,” pp. 546–554, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

Today, 1 John is very much needed, because all sorts of false ideas are being promoted. John calls his audience, and us, not to believe everyone and not to accept uncritically new doctrines, but to test whether or not a teaching is truly biblical. Discernment to distinguish truth from error is needed.

According to John, authentic Christianity has these marks: (1) belief in Jesus as the Son of God, who has come in the flesh; (2) observance of the commandments of God; and (3) love toward God and others. John wants to lay a solid foundation and help his audience have assurance of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ as proclaimed in Scripture.

Discussion Questions:

1 However hard for those who believe in moral absolutes to understand, the idea of moral relativism makes a certain amount of logical sense. If there is no God or Creator and we are purely the results of random forces, where else should morality come from other than from ourselves? And if we change our minds about what is moral . . . well, so what? From a purely practical level, what is wrong with that kind of thinking?

2 Years ago, when asked what the British government could do to help citizens be more moral, Prime Minister Harold McMillan responded, “I’m only the prime minister. Go talk to the archbishop.” How could what we have studied this week help church members be more moral? Or is it even the purpose of the gospel to make us more moral?

3 Fiorello Enrico La Guardia was a judge during the hard years of the Depression in America. One day, a father was brought into his courtroom, having stolen bread. When asked by Judge La Guardia why he did it, the man, sobbing, said that it was to feed his hungry children. La Guardia told the man, “You have committed a crime, you know that?” The man, penitent, barely raising his eyes, nodded and said, “Yes, sir.” La Guardia then said, sternly, that “the law makes no exceptions.” The man nodded. Judge La Guardia then put his hand into his pocket, took out \$10.00, and said, “Here’s the payment for your fine. I pay it myself. Though guilty, you will not face the penalty.” How does this story help us understand not only the gospel but also what it means to live like Jesus?

Stranger in the Village

by BENJAMIN SCHOUN

The man watched in horror as his companion's body floated past him on the river. He had been killed while trying to enter a restricted region without government permission. Though not a Christian missionary, this man's death underscores the difficulty of entering some areas of the world where the government restricts access to outsiders. One such place is an isolated area in Asia that is home to tribal people who worship nature and their ancestors.

Despite the restrictions against outsiders, the church has learned that a large number of people living in this area are worshiping God and keeping the Sabbath. A contact person was able to confirm these reports. He sneaked into the restricted area and entered a large village. The chief confirmed the reports that villagers were keeping the Sabbath. "How can that be?" the informer asked.

"One day a tall stranger entered my village," the chief said. "He had an aura of bright light about him and asked to see the chief. In his hand he held a radio. He showed me how to tune the radio dial to hear the Adventist World Radio (AWR) programs. He told me the time of day that programming is broadcast in our language. Then he told me to share this information with the village, as it would be a great blessing to them.

"I picked up the radio and turned to show it to the person on my right. We turned back to the stranger, but he was gone. We never saw him again. But we took this as a special sign that we should do what he said.

"We called the villagers to gather around and listen to the radio programs. People listened and began changing their lives as they learned about a new way of living from the broadcasts. Today most of the people in this village keep the Sabbath."

The contact person verified that these villagers are indeed devout believers who are worshiping while listening to the radio programs. He also learned that several different tribal groups lived in remote regions of this mountainous area. The villagers have no contact with one another, for they are geographically isolated. Yet when the contact person visited six areas, he found that every chief told the same story. "One day a tall stranger entered the village carrying a radio. He asked for the chief...."

God has a thousand ways to bring the gospel light to those whom governments would seek to keep in darkness. Your mission offerings help make the work of Adventist World Radio possible. Thank you.

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