

1 John

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1 John Introduction – Part 1

The little new Testament book of 1 John may be just a small, short letter, but like some Norwegian fjord, it may not take long to get from one side to the other, but it is very, very deep. So we will need two weeks of introduction before we are “spiritually pressurized” well enough to plunge the depths of 1 John. Introduction Part 1 will look at 3 central themes in the book.

One of my favorite Christmas carols is “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” The lyrics are both poignant and timeless. They spring from an honest confession of the heart of the author. One verse goes this way:

“And in despair I bowed my head
There is no peace on earth I said
For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

Sounds like it could have been written this morning, doesn't it? Hate is not new. Though there is plenty of it in our American streets and politics and media, none of this is new. Since sin entered the world and Cain murdered his brother Abel, hate has been and ever-present part of life. This tribe hates that tribe. This family hates that family. This nation hates that nation. And so it goes...and goes.

The song does end on a positive note, however:

“Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.'”

This is the message of 1 John. God's love is greater than hate, greater than sin. This little book in the back of the Bible has as much to say to our contemporary world as any other in Scripture.

So much of the time we make the mistake of majoring on the minors, that is we focus on and argue about too many things that really do not matter. 1 John makes no such error. "Who is Jesus Christ?" is the central theme of Ch. 1. Christ is the central figure in all history, so it would be good to know the answer to that question. John wants to make it abundantly clear that this Jesus is both God and human. He is the divine Word who became flesh. Only one who is both God and human could do the things that Jesus did. This is every bit as important a question in our day as in John's day, and not for dissimilar reasons.

Somewhere I have a poster with the message "The key to life is balance." That is certainly true when considering the question of "Who is Jesus Christ?" John argues here in his little letter that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. If either side is out of balance then there are real problems and frankly, Jesus isn't Jesus. In John's day the balance was off towards the God side. In our day, the balance is off toward the human side.

CS Lewis in his great book "Mere Christianity" addressed the imbalance of our time:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

So much of 1 John lays the groundwork for Lewis's point. As I said, in John's day the imbalance tipped the other way, people only seeing Jesus as all God and not really human at all. But again, the key is balance, seeing Jesus rightly as both fully God and fully human. In almost any conversation we may have with a lost person it will be vitally important that we rely on 1 John to help them see the truth.

Another important theme in 1 John is how our understanding of who Jesus is informs our ethics and morals. If Jesus was just a good teacher as many in our time believe and not also the divine Son of God, then there is no iron, no teeth to Christian morality. The life of Jesus of Nazareth then does not hold anything decisive for human conduct. His words become just one more man's opinion to be considered or set aside with no consequence. We live in an age where there are no community standards. Each person chooses what morality they will live by and what they may choose on Monday may not be chosen on Tuesday. Today, there are no absolute moral standards because on the whole, we as people no longer know who Jesus Christ really is.

In 1 John what we find is not a set of rules to live by, some moral code of do's and don'ts. Instead, what we find is the life of Christ as model for our day to day living. In the life of Christ, we have a picture of man who lived His life totally under the rule of God, with sacrificial and unconditional love as the first imperative. Love as He loved. Follow His Way. The human experience is far too complex for a single set of rules. Christian ethics and morality thus begins with a surrender, our surrender, not to system, but to a Person.

The third major theme of John's letter is the question of relationships. In a world like ours where morality is purely an individualistic thing and everyone is so hyper-sensitive about their individual rights, it is easy to see why maintaining healthy relationships is so difficult. More people live together than are people willing to commit to being married and of those who are married the majority will end in divorce. Both in John's time and in ours, not only was it nearly impossible for people to maintain healthy relationships, but the "progressives" of each age looked down their noses in contempt at the people who could! 1 John wants us to see the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ as the center of each and every

relationship we carry. My Greek professor in seminary, Malcolm Tolbert, once said that “When God’s love for us becomes God’s love IN us it reaches out to others who, like us, desperately need it precisely because they don’t deserve it.”

Who is Jesus Christ? ethics and morality; and relationships are three of the great themes of 1 John that we will unpack as we go through this biblical fjord.