

God's Message to Us in First John

Halifax, NS

18 August 2019, 2:00 PM

Introduction

We have made our way through the first 61 books of the Bible.

- We only have five more to go.
- The next three of these are letters that were written by the Apostle John.

Today, we will look at his first epistle.

- As with the gospel that he wrote, he does not identify himself by name.
- However, in the way he writes, it is clear that those who received the letter knew who he was, and in the ancient church there was never any question that it was John who wrote this epistle.

You may remember that in the gospel that John wrote, he told us his purpose for writing near the end.

- He told us in John 20:30.
- Do you remember what it was?
 - **John 20:30: And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.**
 - In John, He presents Jesus as the one who has come to give us eternal life—
 - **John 3:36: He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.**
- This being so, it ought to be very important to you to know that you have to come Jesus in such a way that you have obtained life.
 - People are anxious about many things regarding their health and safety, but what could be more important than to know that you have eternal life?
 - The alternative to eternal life is eternal suffering in hell forever.

First John is written to help you who are truly in Christ to know that you have eternal life.

- As he did in his gospel, John tells us his purpose for writing toward the end of his epistle.
 - Look at 1 John 5:13: **These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may *continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.***
 - Realising the importance of being sure that we have believed in such a way that we have obtained life, John has given us a whole letter to help us know.
- John has an interesting style in that the things that he wants to stress, he simply repeats at different points along the way.
 - There is really no one way to outline what he has written.
 - But as he sticks to his theme—of writing about how we can know that we have eternal life and urging us to continue believing—

- I am going to show you six ways that those who have eternal life are distinguished from others

But first, let's look at his introduction in the first four verses.

John begins his letter by telling us that he and his fellow apostles saw eternal life when they saw Jesus.

- They saw eternal life because in Him they saw the Son of God who came in human flesh, and in doing so, brought eternal life into human flesh.
- John emphasises that Jesus really did come in a human body so that they saw Him and heard Him and touched Him. He was not a phantom. He was a real human, yet He was the Son of God who was eternal.

Look at 1 John 1:1-2: **That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—² the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—**

- You can see that John is thrilled with the very thought that he and his fellow apostles were able to see Him and touch Him and hear Him!
 - And that they are able to declare this eternal life that they saw to others—John and his fellow apostles were appointed to be official witnesses of what they saw.

And perhaps equally wonderful... John tells us that he and his fellow apostles were able to have fellowship with eternal life...

- Fellowship does not simply mean that they were able to hang out with Him—which is a very great thing in itself.
 - But it means that they are able to obtain eternal life from Him—to have a share in it.
 - That is what fellowship (*koin-o-nia*) means—to have a share in what others have.
- And not only do John and his fellow apostles have eternal life through Christ...
 - But by telling others about Christ, they are able to bring them into the fellowship of eternal life also.
 - Look at verse 3-4: **that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us [fellowship in eternal life]; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ [they have eternal life in common with the Father and the Son].⁴ And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.**

So you see that John writes so that we may have fellowship in eternal life with Christ who alone has eternal life in Himself.

- In this letter, John tells us how those who have eternal life in Christ stand out from others... how they are distinguished from those who do not have eternal life.
- Let's look at six ways you stand out if you have eternal life.

I. First, if you have eternal life, you stand out because you walk in the light.

- John speaks about walking in the light from 1:5 to 2:2.
- A. Essentially, by walking in the light, John means that you allow yourself to be exposed as a sinner before God.

1. In verse 5, he reminds us that God is light and that in Him there is no darkness at all—no dark side to Him.
 - This makes Him different from all false gods—they are all like us.
 - They have things about them that are shameful and hidden, and they don't mind if we hide a few things too.
 2. When you truly come before God, everything is open and nothing can be hidden.
 - And when that happens, the thing that stands out the most about you is your sin.
 - It is glaring; it is vile.
- B. Notice how as soon as John talks about walking in the light, he starts talking about our sin.
1. Look, for example, in verse 7. Here he tells us that the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin when we walk in the light.
 - We need to be cleansed because the light of God exposes our sin.
 2. In verse 8, he says: **If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.**
 - In other words, we are not walking in the light at all if we say that we have no sin. Those in the light see their sin and their need for cleansing.
 - The pretending game is over—
 - Yes, we still foolishly hide—but fundamentally, we admit that we are sinners who are in desperate need of cleansing.
 - We confess our sins—acknowledge that they are there and that they are vile and unacceptable.
 - In God's light, we see clearly that we need to be cleansed.
- C. The marvellous thing is that fellowship in life is possible because Jesus cleanses us.
1. Again, I point you to verse 7: **But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.**
 - This cleansing by Christ is an ongoing thing for us that God does for us when we come to Him for eternal life in Christ.
 2. 'The blood of Jesus' speaks of His death as a sacrifice for our sin.
 - God's honour demands that sin be punished accordingly, for our sin is fundamentally against Him—we have rejected Him as God.
 - The truth must be upheld that it is entirely unacceptable for creatures to sin against God and that it calls for their eternal condemnation in hell.
 - But the blood of Jesus, His sacrificial death on the cross for sin, appeases the wrath of God.
 - 1 John 2:2 says that Jesus **Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.**
 - There is nothing else that can appease divine wrath so that sinners like us can be forgiven but Christ crucified.
 - By punishing His only beloved Son, God's honour is upheld.

- The wrong of sinning against Him is clearly seen in His pure light and sinners are able to come to Him for forgiveness.
- Jesus is the only propitiation—the only one who can appease the wrath of God for sinners—He is the only one for the whole world.

TRANS> So you see, those who have eternal life are able to walk in the light.

- They are able to have fellowship with God in His pure light because Jesus cleanses them from their sins. Instead of running away, you run to God.

II. **Second, if you have eternal life, you stand out because you obey God’s commandments.**

A. John shows us this in 1 John 2:3-17, beginning with these words: **Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.**

1. Surely this follows from what we have seen about walking in the light.
 - If I walk in the light so that my sin is exposed to such an extent that I see that I must be cleansed by the blood of Christ...
 - It only follows that from then on, I will aim to keep God’s commandments.
 - If I am walking in the light, sin is no longer an acceptable way of life for me.
2. In verses 4-6, John elaborates with these blunt words: **He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. ⁵ But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. ⁶ He who says he abides [continues to live] in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.**
 - If you are walking in ways that are contrary to God, you obviously are not walking with Him in the light.
 - You don’t do vile things that God hates when you know Him.
 - I mean, yes, you do sin—but as a failing—not as a way of life...
 - Back in 2:1, John said that he writes so that we may not sin, but that if we do (for he knows that we do) we have Christ to cleanse us.

B. In 2:7-17 John sketches out what obedience to God’s commandments involves.

1. He says that we love our brothers—those who are in Christ.
 - He describes it as an old commandment that is new in Christ because Christ came to begin something new in the world that will overtake the world.
 - In verse 8, John says that it is **a new commandment, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.**
 - Jesus, you see, has brought this new thing of love into the world where people *actually* love each other—the light is spreading into the world and the darkness is passing away.
 - Jesus is the beginning of this new kingdom of righteousness that is characterised by people loving each other.
2. John then says in verse 12 that he is writing to them all (he calls all of them little children) **because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake.**

- As forgiven, we are able to start out in this community of love that Christ has begun in the world.
 - John writes to the fathers (mature believers), young men (believers who are overcoming the world) and children (those who are just starting out with Christ.)
 - Because they are in Christ, they can go forward in their obedience.
3. So then John admonishes us not to love the world—the old way of darkness.
- He describes it as a self-oriented life where the God’s love is not in us.
 - It is the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—in which rather than living for others and living to do God’s will; you live to satisfy your own cravings and to promote your own importance.
 - Instead of doing the will of God, you make your own will supreme as if you were God.
 - No wonder John says (v. 17): **And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.**
 - So you see then that those who have eternal life are indeed those who are on the pathway of doing the will of God instead of the pathway of following their own sinful desires.
 - That is the nature of eternal life that Jesus brought into the world as the one who possessed it Himself and as the One who imparts it to those who believe.

III. Third, if you have eternal life, you stand out because you continue in the gospel.

- A. In 2:18, John introduces this subject (of continuing in the gospel) by talking about all the antichrists that have arisen in the world.
1. It is important to understand that the word *antichrist* refers to what we might call substitute christs—substitute messiahs—*anti* means *in place of*.
 - They set up alternatives to the true way of salvation in Christ.
 - For example, in our day, we have the prosperity gospel with those like Joel Osteen who preach a Christ that helps you be your best self—here is a message that actually appeals to the lust of the flesh and the pride of life.
 - Or there is liberalism that talks about love, but the way to get there is not by trusting in the Messiah that God sent to die for our sins, but by trusting in their own idealised Jesus who, perhaps, promotes popular social causes (like feminism, transgenderism, environmentalism, etc.) and who ignores God’s moral law set forth in Scripture.
 - And of course there is Roman Catholicism where you rely on the priests to offer the sacrifice, the merit of the saints to intercede, and the pope to decide how God is to be worshipped and what is to be believed.
 2. The key characteristic of these antichrists, according to John, is that (vs 19) they went out from us.
 - In other words, they did not continue to follow the teaching of the apostles of Christ but went out.

- John makes it clear that they never really had eternal life at all, which is proven by the fact that they rejected the gospel taught by John and the other apostles.
 - Verse 19 is very clear about this: **They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.***
- B. But turning to those who believe, John assures us that we won't go for these substitute christs because, vs. 20, **You have an anointing from the holy one and you know all things.**
1. We are anointed with the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that anointed Christ; and the Spirit teaches us the truth.
 - 1 John 2:20: **But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things.**
 - Once you know the truth, you can't go back to not knowing it again.
 - Once you see your true need of salvation from sin, and the way of salvation in Christ—once the Holy Spirit has opened your eyes—
 - no substitute Messiah will do!
 - John says: v. 21-22: **I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son.**
 2. John exhorts you to let the gospel that you heard from the beginning remain in you—so that you will abide (continue or stick with) the Father and the Son and receive the promise of eternal life.
 - Verse 24-25: **Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is the promise that He has promised us—eternal life.**
 3. And the encouragement is that as those anointed with the Holy Spirit, taught by the Spirit of God, we *will* continue—we will abide in Christ.
 - vs 27: **“But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.”**
 - It is a characteristic of those who have eternal life that they do not go after false gospels because they know the true gospel.

IV. Fourth, if you have eternal life, you stand out because you are God's children who love one another.

- A. You are God's children and as such you are going to become like Christ, God's Son.
1. The glorious promise is found in the opening verses of chapter 3:
 - 1 John 3:1-2: **Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. ² Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has**

not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

- Isn't that marvellous news!
 - God has made us His children—and that means that He is going to perfect us so that we can live with Him in glory—we will be like Christ.
 - 2. John, knowing that we are not yet perfect, declares that those who have this future—this hope—this destiny—purify themselves.
 - 3:3 says: **And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.**
- B. As His children we have been changed—born into God's family—so that we no longer follow sin but righteousness.
- That is the subject of 3:4-9.
 - Look at this passage—it can be confusing because at first it sounds like we no longer sin at all if we have eternal life.
 - Let's start with verse 6: **Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. ⁸ He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. ⁹ Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.**
 - But John is not talking about sinless perfection.
 - He is talking here about sin like Adam's sin—in which we reject God to follow sin as opposed to rejecting sin to follow God.
 - In the Bible, people who had rejected God were called sinners and those who were following Him were called righteous, not because they were perfect, but because they lived under God's authority—in submission to righteousness.
 - The idea of verse 9 is that when you are born of God, you cannot go back to living a lawless life—you now live under God's authority...
 - So that when you do sin (as he spoke about at the end of chapter 1) you confess your sin instead of denying it... and look to Jesus Christ as your propitiation.
- C. And what does this new life as God's children look like?
1. What John tells us repeatedly in this letter—it is seen in our love for our brothers.
 - **1 Jn 3:10: In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.**
 - The passage goes on to assert that instead of being like Cain the murderer, we love our brothers—no murderer has eternal life.
 2. But what does the love look like?
 - Verse 16 says: **By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren.**

- It is practical—it is seen in reaching out to our brothers and giving them what they need instead of shutting up our hearts to them.
- When this love is present in your life, it gives you assurance that you have eternal life: **vs 18-19: My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. ¹⁹ And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.**
- If you have this love, you can know that you are in fellowship with God.

V. Fifth, if you have eternal life, you stand out because you have God’s help.

- By that, I mean that you live a supernaturally empowered life that you could not live apart from His grace and power.
 - As Ephesians tells us, the same power that raised Christ from the dead is at work in you to transform you.
 - When that power and grace is at work, it makes it clear that you have eternal life.

A. This is seen in the way that He answers our prayers.

- Not our prayers for physical health or prosperity (though He often does answer those), but our prayers for the new life that He has given us...
 - We pray that we would grow in our love for the Father, in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, in our obedience and love for others.
 - And He answers those prayers...
 - This is expressed in verses 22-23: **And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. ²³ And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.**

B. And related to this, God helps us by giving us the Holy Spirit to work in us.

- At the end of verse 24, it says: **And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.**
 - He gives two ways that you can tell that the Spirit is there:
 1. First, when the Spirit is in you, He leads you to the truth about Christ.
 - That is the subject of 1 John 4:1-6.
 - John explains that there are lying spirits, but that the Holy Spirit is in us when we are led to confess Jesus Christ as revealed by the apostles.
 - a. That we follow the apostle’s doctrine is seen in verse 6 where John says:
 - **1 Jn 4:6: We [apostles] are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.**
 - They continue to speak God’s word today through the scriptures—if what we believe is what the scriptures teach, then we have been taught the truth by God’s Spirit.
 - b. And John tells us, in brief, what we are taught to confess about Jesus Christ when we are taught by the Holy Spirit...

- 1 John 4:2-3: **By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.**
 - False teaching is characterised by its denial that Jesus the Messiah has come in the flesh—
 - They may say that He has not come at all... or not yet.
 - They may say that He did not come in true human flesh but only appeared to be in human flesh—that He was not a real man—which would mean He could not represent us on the cross.
 - Or they may say that God did not come in the flesh but that Jesus was an ordinary man who set an example for us—He set an example instead of coming to die on the cross to turn away God’s wrath.
 - If you come to confess that we are such sinners that God Himself had to come in our flesh and die as a sacrifice for our sins—you have been taught by the Holy Spirit of God!
2. Second, the Holy Spirit is the one who teaches us to love!
- a. John opens this subject in verse 7 with an exhortation to love:
 - **1 Jn 4:7-11: Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.**
 - b. John keeps coming back to this characteristic of love, but here he shows us that this love is a fruit of the ministry of God’s Spirit in us.
 - This love actually grows out of what we confess—the confession that Christ has actually come in the flesh to be a propitiation for our sins.
 - When the Spirit teaches us this deep love of God, He, at the same time, brings forth love in us—
 - having received the love of the Father and the Son, we begin to love one another as those who have been born or begotten of God.
 - c. Look at verse 12-16: **No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. [It is the Holy Spirit that produced this love—and our confession of Christ.] ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son *as* Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.**
 - We know God’s love when the Spirit teaches us the gospel, and then we love by the Spirit’s enablement.

- When you have this supernatural, God-given love, it gives you confidence that all will be well for you on the day of judgement as vv. 17-19 tell us.
3. John goes on insisting that the one who is really born of God is the one who loves those that Christ has begotten—he continues this theme all the way down to 5:4.
- He reiterates that we overcome the world (which, as we saw before, is the life lived for the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life)...
 - and instead we love God and keep His commandments.
 - 5:4 says: **“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”**

TRANS> With these words, John turns back to the foundation of eternal life.

- In 5:5 he says: **Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?**
- That brings us to our last evidence of eternal life—in this case the very foundation of eternal life.

VI. Sixth, if you have eternal life, you stand out because you are born of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

- Let me read these two verses together again...
- 1 John 5:4-5: **For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵ Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?**
- Eternal life comes by looking to Jesus Christ.
 - All that we have seen—walking in the light, obeying God’s commandments, continuing in the gospel, being the children of God who love, and having God’s supernatural power...
 - All those are evidences of eternal life...
 - But eternal life comes by faith in Jesus Christ.
 - We look to Him as the one who was crucified to give us eternal life.

A. We believe the testimony that God has given to us about Jesus His Son.

- John tells us that God had given testimony by three things...
 - That Jesus came by water, by blood, and by the Holy Spirit.
 - **1 John 5:6: This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. ⁷ For there are three that bear witness...**
- 1. In his gospel, John told how Jesus, while on the cross, was pierced in His heart so that water and blood came forth, showing that He had truly died.
 - God the Son in human flesh died. That is the great fact that is presented.
 - He had a human body, not just the appearance of one, out of which water and blood came after death.
 - These, of course, are also the two great cleansing elements that are found all the way through the Bible...

- *Water* to wash away our sins when we are baptised into Christ's death and resurrection for new life...
 - And *blood* to atone for our sins—to secure our pardon, which is presented to us in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.
2. And then there is the Holy Spirit.
- As we have seen, He is the one who enables us to believe the gospel, to see our need for salvation and then to see how Christ alone is able to save.
 - The Spirit is the One who enabled John and the others to write, not their own clever interpretation about Christ, but the testimony of God that we can rely upon.
- By these three, God has testified to us that salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ crucified.
- B. Because God has testified that eternal life is given to those who trust in Jesus, we can have absolute certainty that in believing, we have eternal life.
- It is God who has testified that life is in His Son!
1. John says: **5:9-11: If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son. ¹⁰ He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son. ¹¹ And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.**
- Faith is no leap in the dark, no wishful thinking, no power of positive thinking... not biblical saving faith.
 - Biblical faith is believing the testimony that God has given of His Son:
 - That He was manifested in the flesh and that He gave Him to die for our sins so that we could have eternal life.
2. It is absolutely certain that you who believe in Him have life through Him.
- **1 Jn 5:12: He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.**
 - It is that simple.
3. John has written this letter with all these evidences of eternal life to help you who believe to know that you have life.
- **1 John 5:13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may *continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.***
- C. John concludes his letter in assuring us that God will answer our prayers as those who are in Christ.
1. If we pray to be kept by His power, if we pray for forgiveness when we or others have sinned, we know that He hears us (v. 14-17)...
- as long as the sin is not the kind that leads to death—the sin of one who is rejecting Christ—showing that he never knew Him...
2. We know that if we are born of God, we will not return to a life of sin because God keeps us and Satan cannot have us.

- **1 Jn 5:18-19: We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him. ¹⁹ We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies *under the sway of the wicked one*.**
3. And finally, we know that Jesus has come so that we might have life with God.
- **1 Jn 5:20: And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may 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.**
 - You can be sure that God actually gives us fellowship with Him in eternal life.
 - That is the reason He came and did all that He did.
 - It is His good pleasure to give us eternal life, else He would never have come and did all that He did.

Conclusion:

This being so, John concludes with the very appropriate charge—“**Little children, keep yourself from idols.**”

- Idolatry is making your own way to have fellowship with God—by images, sacrifices, priests, good works, payment, you name it...
 - But God has sent His Son to die and *He* has testified that life in in His Son.
 - Jesus Christ is God’s way to eternal life...
 - Little children, keep yourselves from idols!