



THE FIRST LETTER OF SAINT JOHN

FROM THE GOOD NEWS BIBLE

INTRODUCTION

The first letter of John was written in around 90AD by the Apostle John, who was Jesus's best friend and the author of the fourth Gospel. Although he never identifies himself in the letter, it has been attributed to John since at least as early as 150AD.

Although we call it a letter, it's quite possible that it was written to be a sermon, preached on his behalf in John's Churches which he was not able to visit in his later years. John is writing to the Churches to encourage them to stay faithful to the teaching they received from him when they first came to faith in Jesus.

There are several things that it's worth noting about John's teaching in the letter:

Contrasts

Firstly, John uses a lot of contrasts in the letter (as he also does in his Gospel). Darkness versus light. Sin versus righteousness. Truth versus lies. Jesus versus his enemies. God versus the world.

It's important to remember that John is writing to Christians, to the Church, so John is making sure they understand where they stand as followers of Jesus. As God's children they, and we, are on the side of light, righteousness, truth.

If...then...

Another way that John makes his argument is by using lots and lots of 'if...then...' statements. "If we live in the light...then we have fellowship with one another" (1:7). "If we say we are in the light, yet hate others, then we are in the darkness" (2:9). "If we are rich and see others in need, yet close our hearts against them, then how can we claim that we love God?" (3:17). "If this is how God loved us, then we should love one another" (4:11).

These statements are designed to challenge the hearers to reflect on their own life and beliefs because ultimately, for John, following Jesus should make a difference to how we live our life. As he says in chapter three: “Our love should not be just words and talk, it must be true love which shows itself in action.”

Love

Love is at the heart of this letter. God’s love for us, our love for Jesus and, perhaps especially, our love for one another. Being in Christian community means loving one another, even if we have disagreements (which we can see from John’s other letters was very much the case there!).

In many ways this whole letter is an extended commentary on Jesus’s command to the disciples at the last supper to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). This is the core of John’s theology, everything else is just working this out in real life.

Community

Finally, this letter is written to a community and should always be read in that context. John isn’t writing to individual Christians, he’s writing to the Church as a whole because that’s where faith is found. In the early Church to become a Christian meant becoming part of the community of the Church. As we wrestle with the issues John raises, our question should always be “what does this mean for us?”, not “what does this mean for me?”.

Conclusion

This is a rich and poetic letter which, although it wasn’t written to us, can teach us a lot about what it means to live as a Christian in the fellowship of the Church. Do read it carefully and faithfully, and, most of all - enjoy it!

Rev’d Rich, April 2024

CHAPTER ONE

The Word of Life

¹We write to you about the Word of life, which has existed from the very beginning. We have heard it, and we have seen it with our eyes; yes, we have seen it, and our hands have touched it. ²When this life became visible, we saw it; so

What's happening here?

John was Jesus's best friend and knew him really well, so when he talks about seeing and touching him that's because he actually did do just that so can be sure that Jesus was real!

we speak of it and tell you about the eternal life which was with the Father and was made known to us. ³What we have seen and heard we announce to you also, so that you will join with us in the fellowship that we have with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴We write this in order that our joy may be complete.

God Is Light

What's happening here?

There are parallels here with the themes of John's Gospel. Take a look at John 1:1-14 and see what connections you can find.

⁵Now the message that we have heard from his Son and announce is this: God is light, and there is no darkness at all in him. ⁶If, then, we say that we have fellowship with him, yet at the same time live in the darkness, we are lying both in our words and in our actions. ⁷But if we live in the light—just as he is in the light—then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin.

⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us. ⁹But if we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make a liar out of God, and his word is not in us.

What's happening here?

Confession has always been an important part of Church life, helping us to recognise our sins and reminds us of God's forgiveness.

CHAPTER TWO

Christ Our Helper

What's happening here?

The word translated "my children", which is used a number of times in the letter, is a loving and tender word - "my little ones". This tenderness is also echoed in his use of "dear friends".

¹I am writing this to you, my children, so that you will not sin; but if anyone does sin, we have someone who pleads with the Father on our behalf—Jesus Christ, the righteous one. ²And Christ himself is the means by

which our sins are forgiven, and not our sins only, but also the sins of everyone.

³If we obey God's commands, then we are sure that we know him. ⁴If we say that we know him, but do not obey his commands, we are liars and there is no truth in us.

⁵But if we obey his word, we are the ones whose love for God has really been made perfect. This is how we can be sure that we are in union with God: ⁶if we say that we remain

in union with God, we should live just as Jesus Christ did.

The New Command

⁷My dear friends, this command I am writing you is not new; it is the old command, the one you have had from the very beginning. The old command is the message you have already heard. ⁸However, the command I now write you is new, because its truth is seen in Christ and also in you. For the darkness is passing away, and the real light is already shining.

What's happening here?

The 'old command' is likely Jesus's 'new commandment' to love one another. John taught them this when they first believed.

⁹If we say that we are in the light, yet hate others, we are in the darkness to this very hour. ¹⁰If we love others, we live in the light, and so there is nothing in us that will cause someone else to sin. ¹¹But if we hate others, we are in the darkness; we walk in it and do not know where we are going, because the darkness has made us blind.

What's happening here?

In addressing 'children', 'fathers' and 'young people' in this poetic passage, John is not referring to their ages or their human roles and relationships. Instead he's talking to people at all different levels of Christian maturity - those who are new to faith and those who are more experienced.

¹²I write to you, my children, because your sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ. ¹³I write to you, fathers, because you know him who has existed from the beginning. I write to you, young people, because you have defeated the Evil One.

¹⁴I write to you, my children,

because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who has existed from the beginning. I write to you, young people, because you are strong; the word of God lives in you, and you have defeated the Evil One.

¹⁵Do not love the world or anything that belongs to the world. If you love the world, you do not love the Father. ¹⁶Everything that belongs to the world—what the sinful self desires, what people see and want, and everything in this world that

people are so proud of—none of this comes from the Father; it all comes from the world. ¹⁷The world and everything in it that people desire is passing away; but those who do the will of God live forever.

What's happening here?

Here John is setting up a contrast between 'the world' and God. Christians are not to chase after the desires of the world, but instead should seek to do the will of God - we can't do both!

The Enemy of Christ

What's happening here?

'Enemy of Christ' is sometimes translated 'antichrist'. By it John means those who claimed to be Christians but actually turned against them. In a time when Christians were persecuted this was a very real danger.

¹⁸My children, the end is near! You were told that the Enemy of Christ would come; and now many enemies of Christ have already appeared, and so we know that the end is near. ¹⁹These people really did not belong to our fellowship, and that is why they left us; if they had belonged to our fellowship, they would have stayed with us. But they left so that it might be clear that

none of them really belonged to us.

²⁰But you have had the Holy Spirit poured out on you by Christ, and so all of you know the truth. ²¹I write you, then, not because you do not know the truth; instead, it is because you do know it, and you also know that no lie ever comes from the truth.

²²Who, then, is the liar? It is those who say that Jesus is not the Messiah. Such people are the Enemy of Christ—they reject both the Father and the Son. ²³For those who reject the Son reject also the Father; those who accept the Son have the Father also.

²⁴Be sure, then, to keep in your hearts the message you heard from the beginning. If you keep that message, then you will always live in union with the Son and the Father. ²⁵And this is what Christ himself promised to give us—eternal life.

What's happening here?

Again John comes back to the theme of 'the message you have heard from the beginning', reminding them to be faithful to his original teaching and the faith they first received.

What's happening here?

It seems that some people were trying to set themselves up as teachers in the Church who were not qualified to do so. John reminds them that the Holy Spirit is their true teacher.

²⁶I am writing this to you about those who are trying to deceive you. ²⁷But as for you, Christ has poured out his Spirit on you. As long as his Spirit remains in you, you do not need anyone to teach you. For his Spirit teaches you

about everything, and what he teaches is true, not false. Obey the Spirit's teaching, then, and remain in union with Christ.

²⁸Yes, my children, remain in union with him, so that when he appears we may be full of courage and need not hide in shame from him on the Day he comes. ²⁹You know that Christ is righteous; you should know, then, that everyone who does what is right is God's child.

CHAPTER THREE

Children of God

What's happening here?

John is really getting into his stride now. He's set up the contrast between God and the world, and now reminds them that they (we) are God's Children, with all the benefits and blessings that come from that - even those we don't know about!

¹See how much the Father has loved us! His love is so great that we are called God's children—and so, in fact, we are. This is why the world does not know us: it has not known God. ²My dear friends, we are now God's children, but it is not yet clear what we shall become. But we know that when Christ

appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is. ³Everyone who has this hope in Christ keeps himself pure, just as Christ is pure.

⁴Whoever sins is guilty of breaking God's law, because sin is a breaking of the law. ⁵You know that Christ appeared in order

to take away sins, and that there is no sin in him. ⁶So everyone who lives in union with Christ does not continue to sin; but whoever continues to sin has never seen him or known him.

What's happening here?

John returns to his earlier point contrasting sin and righteousness - those who are in Christ are no longer bound by sin because Jesus has taken our sins away!

⁷Let no one deceive you, my children! Whoever does what is right is righteous, just as Christ is righteous. ⁸Whoever continues to sin belongs to the Devil, because the Devil has sinned from the very beginning. The Son of God appeared for this very reason, to destroy what the Devil had done.

⁹Those who are children of God do not continue to sin, for God's very nature is in them; and because God is their Father, they cannot continue to sin. ¹⁰Here is the clear difference between God's children and the Devil's children: those who do not do what is right or do not love others are not God's children.

Love One Another

What's happening here?

Again John reminds them of Jesus's teaching to love one another, using a story from the Old Testament (Genesis 4) as a parable to illustrate the contrast between doing wrong and doing right.

¹¹The message you heard from the very beginning is this: we must love one another. ¹²We must not be like Cain; he belonged to the Evil One and murdered his own brother Abel. Why did Cain murder him? Because the things he himself did were wrong, and the things his brother did were right.

What's happening here?

The strength of John's language here shows the passion with which he writes. These are not mere philosophical musings, they matter!

¹³So do not be surprised, my friends, if the people of the world hate you. ¹⁴We know that we have left death and come over into life; we know it because we love others. Those who do not love are still

under the power of death. ¹⁵Those who hate others are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life in them.

¹⁶This is how we know what love is: Christ gave his life for us. We too, then, ought to give our lives for others! ¹⁷If we are rich and see others in need, yet close our hearts against them, how can we claim that we love God? ¹⁸My

What's happening here?

Again John comes back to the theme of community. Read Acts 2:32-35 to see how the very early Church - of which John was a key part - lived this out.

children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action.

Courage before God

¹⁹This, then, is how we will know that we belong to the truth; this is how we will be confident in God's presence. ²⁰If our conscience condemns us, we know that God is greater than our conscience and that he knows everything. ²¹And so, my dear friends, if our conscience does not condemn us, we have courage in God's presence. ²²We receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases

him. ²³What he commands is that we believe in his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as Christ commanded us. ²⁴Those who obey God's commands live in union with God and God lives in union with them. And because of the Spirit that God has given us we know that God lives in union with us.

What's happening here?

John is building here on another of the key themes in the letter - that of union with God. And what unites us with God? Our faith in Jesus and our love for one another (there's Jesus's commandment again!)

CHAPTER FOUR

The True Spirit and the False Spirit

What's happening here?

John returns to the theme of false teachers in the Church (see 2:26-27). The key test for John is whether they acknowledge Jesus's humanity. The Gnostics, an influential sect at the time, denied this. This also links back to the opening of chapter 1 and John's own experience of Jesus's physical reality.

¹My dear friends, do not believe all who claim to have the Spirit, but test them to find out if the spirit they have comes from God. For many false prophets have gone out everywhere. ²This is how you will be able to know whether it is God's Spirit: anyone who acknowledges that Jesus Christ came as a human being has the Spirit who comes from God. ³But anyone who denies

this about Jesus does not have the Spirit from God. The spirit that he has is from the Enemy of Christ; you heard that it would come, and now it is here in the world already.

⁴But you belong to God, my children, and have defeated the false prophets, because the Spirit who is in you is more powerful than the spirit in those who belong to the world. ⁵Those false prophets speak about matters of the world, and the world listens to them because they belong to the world. ⁶But we belong to God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever does not belong to God does not listen to us. This, then, is how we can tell the difference between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

God Is Love

What's happening here?

This is one of the most well known passages from this letter, and is a favourite at weddings. However John is not talking about romantic love, but the life-giving love that Jesus commands us to have for one another which is shown in our actions (see 3:16-18).

⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Whoever loves is a child of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹And God showed his love for us by sending his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him.

¹⁰This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven.

¹¹Dear friends, if this is how God loved us, then we should love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect in us.

¹³We are sure that we live in union with God and that he lives in union with us, because he has given us his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and tell others that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵If we declare that Jesus is the Son of God, we live in union with God and God lives in union with us. ¹⁶And we ourselves know and believe the love which God has for us.

What's happening here?

Again John returns to the theme of union with God. This passage is one of the most Trinitarian in the whole Bible where we can clearly see God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit together.

What's happening here?

The interwoven themes of union with God and love for one another reach their culmination in this passage - We are united with God in love, and so we can't love others without loving God, but we also can't love God without loving others!

God is love, and those who live in love live in union with God and God lives in union with them. ¹⁷Love is made perfect in us in order that we may have courage on the Judgment Day; and we will have it because our life in this world is the same as Christ's. ¹⁸There is no

fear in love; perfect love drives out all fear. So then, love has not been made perfect in anyone who is afraid, because fear has to do with punishment.

¹⁹We love because God first loved us. ²⁰If we say we love God, but hate others, we are liars. For we cannot love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love others, whom we have seen. ²¹The command that Christ has given us is this: whoever loves God must love others also.

CHAPTER FIVE

Our Victory over the World

¹Whoever believes that Jesus is the Messiah is a child of God; and whoever loves a father loves his child also. ²This is how we know that we love God's children: it is by loving God and obeying his commands. ³For our love for God means that we obey his commands. And his commands are not too hard for us, ⁴because every child of God is able to defeat the world. And we win the victory over the world by means of our faith. ⁵Who can defeat the world? Only the person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

What's happening here?

The early Christians were a very small group, facing great opposition and persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. The promise of victory over the world by following Jesus's commands of love would have been an incredibly powerful idea.

The Witness about Jesus Christ

What's happening here?

In a court of law at the time two witnesses were reliable, but having three witnesses was irrefutable proof that something had happened.

⁶Jesus Christ is the one who came with the water of his baptism and the blood of his death. He came not only with the water, but with both the water and the blood. And the Spirit himself testifies that this is true, because the Spirit is truth. ⁷There are three witnesses: ⁸the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and all three give the same testimony. ⁹We believe human testimony; but God's testimony is much stronger, and he has given this

testimony about his Son. ¹⁰So those who believe in the Son of God have this testimony in their own heart; but those who do not believe God, have made a liar of him, because they have not believed what God has said about his Son. ¹¹The testimony is this: God has given us eternal life, and this life has its source in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son has this life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Eternal Life

¹³I am writing this to you so that you may know that you have eternal life—you that believe in the Son of God. ¹⁴We have courage in God's presence, because we are sure that he hears us if we ask him for anything that is according to his will. ¹⁵He hears us whenever we ask him; and since we know this is true, we know also that he gives us what we ask from him.

What's happening here?

This passage has strong echoes of Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus in John 3.

What's happening here?

It's not entirely clear what John is referring to here by 'sin that leads to death', but it may well be to those who act like followers of Jesus but are really there to betray them (see 2:18-19). Other sins can, and should, be prayed about.

¹⁶If you see a believer commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray to God, who will give that person life. This applies to those whose sins do not lead to death. But there is sin which leads to death, and I do not say that you should pray to God about that.

¹⁷All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which does not lead to death.

¹⁸We know that no children of God keep on sinning, for the Son of God keeps them safe, and the Evil One cannot harm them. ¹⁹We know that we belong to God even though the whole world is under the rule of the Evil One. ²⁰We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we know the true God. We live in union with the true God—in union with his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and this is eternal life.

What's happening here?

Ultimately, John concludes, as God's children we are safe from the dangers of sin because Jesus has come to reveal God to us and we are united with God through Jesus and because of this have eternal life.

The final line is a warning against anything that might take God's place in our lives.

²¹My children, keep yourselves safe from false gods!

Final reflections

- ✧ Which of the themes of this letter were you drawn to?
- ✧ Was there anything in what John said that you found challenging?
- ✧ What does the command to “love one another” look like in our Church today? Are we good at it? What could we do better?
- ✧ Do you feel the tension that John highlights between chasing after the desires and temptations of the world, and seeking to do the will of God? How does being part of a Church community help you navigate that tension?
- ✧ John is very firm that we must believe in the physical nature of Jesus's humanity. Is this something you've thought much about?
- ✧ What will change in how you live as a Christian as a result of reading this letter?

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