

## *Acts 2: Lesson Seven, John's Epistles*

### *1, 2, 3 John*

**Subject:** John's three letters exposed false teachers and confirmed the nature of true fellowship with God.

**Main Idea:** John wrote about staying strong and healthy in a hostile environment.

**Principles:**

1. *A strong, healthy family has conscious fellowship with one another.*
2. *A strong, healthy family is built on truth and love.*

### **Introduction**

All of us know the importance of keeping our minds, bodies, and relationships strong and healthy. We understand that unhealthy habits increase our vulnerability to unpleasant consequences. Did you know that the same principle applies to your spiritual life? It applies not only to each of us personally but also to our churches. The apostle John wrote three epistles to the Church about staying strong and healthy in a hostile environment. False teaching was on the rise then and abounds today. To ignore John's teachings may be at our peril. We need to keep our churches and ourselves strong and healthy.

Unlike the typical epistle, John's do not include his name. However, early church writers state that John, the beloved disciple of Jesus (who was possibly also Jesus' cousin) was the author. He and his brother James were fisherman. Together with Peter, they were Jesus' closest companions. Jesus referred to John and James as "sons of thunder." Altogether, John wrote five New Testament books: The Gospel of John, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation. His gospel and three epistles were almost certainly written late in the first century, and Revelation probably was as well. According to second century church fathers, John lived a long life and spent most of his older years in Ephesus, where he died a natural death, sometime during the reign of the emperor Trajan (AD 97-117). Assuming this is true, John couldn't have been more than a teenager when Jesus called him as His disciple!

1, 2, and 3 John give us interesting insights into the condition of the church at the end of the first century. John was personally associated with the churches in and around Ephesus. Apparently, some of the leaders in those churches had fallen into heresy and started new congregations. In order to propagate their false teachings, the consortium of new congregations followed the pattern of those who spread the gospel in the first two centuries: they sent out itinerate teachers and missionaries (1 John 2:19; 2 John 2:10). According to John's letters, these traveling false teachers, or "antichrists," claimed to know God (2:4; 4:1-3) but taught that Jesus Christ had not come in the flesh (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). The heresy known as Gnosticism interwove Christian teachings with Greek thought and concluded that all matter (including the human body) was evil. Gnostics thus denied the Incarnation. They taught that Christ entered the human Jesus at His baptism and departed from Him on the Cross. An alternate view was that Jesus Christ only seemed to have a real body. Additionally, Gnostics taught that salvation came not by faith in Christ but by way of special, secretive knowledge (*gnosis* or *ginōskō*). Thus, throughout John's first epistle, we find him repeatedly countering, "we know," "and we know," or "by this we know."

Although Gnosticism didn't formalize until the second century, various forms of it began infiltrating churches by late in the first century. It seems these false teachers caused such a commotion in and around Ephesus, and a sufficient number of the faithful began to question whether they were really in the truth and knew God, that John felt compelled to write. In order for these congregations to remain strong and healthy, his readers needed assurance that they were in Christ and they needed instruction in evaluating and relating to false teachers. Thus, our outline is "Confidence in Our Position" (assurance we are in Christ) and "Communicating our Position" (relating to false teachers).

John referred to his readers as his "children" ten times in his epistles, a hint of his old age. In fact, after years of walking with Jesus, this "son of thunder" had become so tender that he often referred to them as "dear children." John's epistles also use many terms that are also found in his gospel (such as "light" and "life"). His gospel was written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). 1 John was written so "that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). Thus, the two complement one another, the Gospel of John giving a *basis for belief* in Jesus for salvation and 1 John giving a *basis for assurance* of salvation in Jesus. Assurance of salvation is critical to our spiritual health. We need confidence in our position.

## I. Confidence in our Position – 1 John

### A. Three Evidences of Salvation – 1:1-3:10

- i. John's Purpose in Writing – 1:1-7: The word "fellowship" appears four times in the first seven verses. John testified to a person and a life he had seen with his own eyes so that others might join into the fellowship believers have with God and one another. Fellowship goes beyond mere partnership; it is an expression of a healthy and growing relationship with God and other believers.<sup>i</sup> To lack assurance of salvation is disruptive to conscious fellowship. How can one feel confident drawing near to God or other believers without confidence they have that right, that they belong?
- ii. Evidences of Salvation – 1:5-2:28: Since God is light (upright and righteous), John called true fellowship "walking in the light" (1:7). Throughout his letter, he presented three evidences of true fellowship with God: obedience, love, and truth. John expounds on these in chapters 1-2.
  1. *Obedience* – 1:5-2:6: The first evidence is obedience.
    - a. The false teachers claimed to have fellowship with God, but they walked in darkness. Some of the Gnostics taught that since the body was evil, what we did with it didn't matter. They denied they were sinners, but John clearly stated they deceived themselves. Those who walk in darkness deny that they have sins that need to be forgiven. Those who walk in the light have fellowship with one another and have experienced forgiveness of sin.

- b. John didn't want his readers to buy into the heretical teaching that God's grace was a license for sin. He said he wrote so that they would *not* sin (live obediently) but assured them that when they did, they had an advocate with the Father (2:1) who would forgive and purify them (1:9). Those who walk in the light are keenly aware of their sin and eager to confess it.
- 2. *Love* – 2:7-17: The second evidence of fellowship with God is love. John said that anyone who claimed to be in the light but hates his brother or sister is still in darkness (2:9).
  - a. In a poetic type format, John affirmed he was writing so that his readers would know they had been forgiven, truly knew God, and had the word of God living in them. He said his readers had overcome the temptations of Satan, the evil one (2:13-14). Their struggle to resist false teaching was part of this. John was confident they would resist because they were true believers and had the word of God living in them.
  - b. Believers love one another because the love of God is in them. John warned that love for God and love for the evil world system that is aligned against God and His purposes are mutually exclusive. John's strong statement that we *cannot* love both God and the world implies a choice of allegiance. True believers choose to love God and one another.
- 3. *Truth* – 2:18-28: The third evidence of true fellowship with God is one's response to truth. We cannot believe lies and also be in fellowship with God.
  - a. *The Spirit of Antichrist*: The spirit of antichrist is in every person who verbally denies that Jesus is the Christ (2:22). Later, in 4:2, John indicated that the heretics about whom he spoke didn't "deny Christ" per se, but diminished Him by denying His humanity. Therefore, the spirit of antichrist is present in anyone who "accepts" a Jesus of some kind, *but not the Jesus of the Scriptures*.
  - b. *Not Outsiders*: The antichrists in Ephesus weren't intruders from outside the church but arose from within it (2:19). They had at one time professed true faith in Jesus but the genuineness of their profession was eventually disproven by their denial of the apostles' witness and teachings. Those in fellowship with God accept the Scriptures as their only reliable source of authority for Christian faith and practice.

- c. *The Last Hour*: John wrote that “this is the last hour” (2:18). We have learned that the “last days” sometimes refer to the entire period between Christ’s ascension and second coming and sometimes to the specific period immediately prior to His return. Since Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, the world has known many antichrists. However, the New Testament also teaches that just prior to Christ’s return, a man more evil than any previous antichrist will arise and delude the world (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Revelation 13).
- d. *The Holy One’s Anointing*: John reminded his readers that they did not belong to the spirit of antichrist. Jesus had anointed them with the Holy Spirit at their conversion. Jesus called the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of truth” (John 15:26). He said He would teach us all things (John 14:26). He is our ultimate teacher. However, we must heed the Bible’s warning about the deceptive nature of our own hearts (Jeremiah 17:9) and always compare our inner thoughts and feelings with the words of Scripture. The Holy Spirit will never lead us in ways that contradict the Bible.

**B. Additional Teachings on These Evidences, Emphasizing Sonship – 3:1-5:12:**  
 The end of chapter 2 and each of the remaining chapters speak of being “born of God” (2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:4). The three evidences of salvation are repeated in chapters 3-5, but this time, in the context of being a child of God.

i. Obedience as an Evidence of Sonship – 3:1-10

1. *A New Nature*: John reminded us that as children of God, we have a new nature. We cannot presently see all that we will one day be. At Christ’s return, our sanctification will be complete and our bodies will be transformed to be like the body Christ has had, since His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:49). John said that all who have this hope purify themselves, just as Jesus is pure (3:3).
2. *The Purity of God’s Children*: In verse 6, John wrote that no one who lives in Christ keeps on sinning. However, in chapter 1, he told us what to do when we do sin (1:9). Obviously then, John was “not suggesting that the child of God will not commit a single act of sin.” Instead, he was “describing a way of life, a character, a prevailing lifestyle.”<sup>ii</sup> True children of God have a new nature and although still imperfect, our new nature changes our view of sin. What we used to find enjoyable becomes increasingly distasteful. The obedient nature of God’s children reflects a marked break with our old, disobedient nature as children of the devil.

- ii. More on Love as an Evidence of True Fellowship – 3:11-24: As sons and daughters of God, our new nature is like Christ’s and therefore, we will love as He loved.
1. *Shown in Action*: John contrasted the love of Jesus in sacrificing Himself for His brothers and sisters with the hatred of Cain, who murdered his innocent brother. John’s comment that those who hate are guilty of murder before God came from Jesus’ own teachings (3:15; Matthew 5:21-22). While one might possibly conceal inner hatred, true love cannot be hidden. Jesus’ sacrifice was evidence of His love. John said that love always shows itself with action (3:18).
  2. *Deeds of Love Give Assurance*: Although not every translation reflects it, in the original Greek, the opening words of verse 19 are “And by this.” With that in mind, verses 19-24 must be read in the context of loving one another (3:11-18). One scholar explains the verses about our hearts condemning or not condemning us in this way:

*The demand for sacrificial charity has been made towards ‘a poor man, one of your brethren’ (Deuteronomy 15:7, cf. 1 John 3:17); but a base thought arises in the heart of a Christian which condemns the sacrifice demanded as unnecessary, and suggests that it can be avoided and that love can be maintained apart from a definite surrender of life or goods. The writer of the letter insists that this impulse, however natural, must be eradicated. The heart must be reasoned with and persuaded in the presence of God to make the sacrifice willingly. The demand of God is greater than the base and ignorant impulse of the human heart (cf. 4:4). Moreover, His knowledge is infinite, and no motion of the heart escapes His notice.<sup>iii</sup>*

If we persuade our hearts to follow through with sacrificial demonstrations of love, instead of rationalizing inaction, our confidence in our relationship with God will increase, including our confidence that He will answer our prayers. Obeying God’s command to love our brothers and sisters increases our assurance that we belong to Him.

- iii. Distinguishing and Persevering in Truth – 4:1-6: Chapter 4 begins by carrying over the final thought of chapter 3, that it is the Holy Spirit who assures us of salvation. The trouble is that many claimed to have God’s Spirit in them, including the heretics John warned about. Believers shouldn’t be gullible but must discern the true spirit within each person who professes to speak in God’s name. Is the determination of truth merely a subjective judgment then, or is there an objective standard?
1. In these verses, John teaches that the spirit of antichrist, when not outright denying the Jesus is the Christ, will make Him out to be less than He is. Jesus is fully human and fully divine. He came in the flesh. He is from God. The Jesus presented by the heretics of John’s day was something less.
  2. Secondly, false teachers appeal to the flesh, and so, the world listens to them. By contrast, the testimony of the Holy Spirit is always consistent with God’s word. In verse 6, John states that the teachings of true, faithful teachers measure up to this standard and thus, could be recognized as the Spirit of truth.
  3. According to verse 4, those who hold to the truth will overcome, that is, they persevere in the faith. They do so because they have the greater Witness of the Holy Spirit within them, the Spirit of Truth. John affirmed what the writer of Hebrews also taught, that the ultimate proof of a person’s faith is perseverance in the truth (2:24, 4:4).
- iv. Sacrificial Love – 4:7-21: The balance of chapter 4 returns to the theme of love (4:16). Love comes from God and therefore, intimate acquaintance with Him produces love in us. John once again referred to Christ’s sacrifice as the ultimate model. The world’s love is a selfish love. The world loves in response to what the object of their love does *for them*. God’s love (and therefore, Christian love) is unselfish. When we love as Jesus loves, we no longer fear the Judgment Day, because we *know* that we belong to Christ.
- v. The Test of Belief – 5:1-12: In chapter 5, John tied obedience and love to truth. These three evidences of salvation are a tight unit. We love and we obey because we believe (5:1-5). John contrasted belief based on truth with the beliefs of the heretics.
1. 5:6 indicates that the antichrists denied that Jesus came “by water and blood.” This is a difficult verse to understand, but the best interpretation seems to be that the water refers to Jesus’ baptism and the blood to His death on the cross. These two events marked the beginning and end of His earthly ministry.

2. In light of the Gnostics' denial of Christ's humanity (4:2), John seems to have been saying that Jesus Christ's baptism and death prove that He was fully human. Many witnessed these events. They happened "in time and space and history." In other words, we do not believe in a Jesus who only acted in "the realm of ideas or the spiritual world."<sup>iv</sup> He was fully human and fully divine. *To believe that Jesus Christ was not both fully human and fully divine or to diminish His deity or humanity is heresy.* As an eyewitness and very close companion to Jesus, John adamantly insisted that the human Jesus was (and is) the divine, preexistent Son of God.
3. The implication of the heretics' denial of the reality of Christ's death is that His death was unnecessary to our atonement. True children of God who have the Spirit's testimony within them (5:7) affirm that Christ's *real life* was necessary in order for God to declare us righteous and His *real death* was necessary to our atonement.

### C. Encouragement to Pray for Believers Who Are out of Fellowship – 5:13-21

#### i. Confidence in Prayer

1. John's goal in writing was that believers would have assurance of eternal life (5:13). This was essential to their spiritual health. For example, John said that assurance of sonship gives us confidence in approaching God in prayer.
2. John wrote that God would answer if we ask "according to His will" (5:14). Many believers come to God with their "laundry list" of wants without ever considering whether they are praying in His will. Beginning our prayer times with praise, thanksgiving, confession, and speaking God's own words from the Bible back to Him will change the way we present our petitions. Selfish requests will be replaced with ones in accord with His good and perfect will.

#### ii. Prayer for Those in Sin: John said we should pray for those who sin in a way that *does not lead to death*.

1. What is the sin that leads to death? Jesus said that to credit the activity of the Holy Spirit to the devil was an unforgivable sin (Mark 3:29). The heretics in and around Ephesus in John's day had knowingly and deliberately turned away from the truth they had experienced in the Christian community. They did not recognize the activity of the Holy Spirit for what it was. John did not forbid us to pray for those who commit the sin that leads to death. However, until such individuals repent, asking for forgiveness for them is useless.<sup>v</sup>

2. John's focus was not on those whose sin led to death but on those who had sinned in *other* ways, so that conscious fellowship with God and other believers wasn't broken.
- iii. Concluding Verses: 5:18-20 are a restatement of the things John has discussed.

**Summary Statement:** The presence and teachings of antichrists disturbed the believers in and around Ephesus. John wrote in order that they might *know* that they had eternal life (5:13). To be strong and healthy, Christians must be conscious of fellowship with God and one another.

**Principle:** *A strong, healthy family has conscious fellowship with one another.*

It is not a coincidence that a book written to believers who lacked assurance of salvation begins with a call to confess our sins (1:9) and ends with a call to pray for believers who are in sin (5:16). While John urged us to obey God, love Him and others, and persevere in truth, he knew that we would stumble from time to time (2:1). When we disobey God, act without love, or fall away from the truth, we grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). True believers cannot lose their salvation, but sin does disrupt conscious fellowship with God and confidence in our relationship with Him.

When we sin against one of our friends or family members, the relationship is strained, fellowship is broken, and there is no joy in it until we make things right. When we sin against God, our relationship with Him is also strained and we lose the joy of conscious fellowship. We each have many sins we are yet unaware of. God will reveal those in His time. We are responsible today for our known sins. Whether it is an inner sin, such as pride, lust, bitterness, love of the world, greed, or self-pity, or an outward sin, such as a bad temper, indulgence in emptiness, lying and deceit, or withholding love, we should confess it to God *as soon as He reveals it to us.*

**Application:** If you have never repented of your sins and made a definite commitment to receive Christ as Savior and Lord, will you do so today in a simple prayer and then believe that He has forever saved you and birthed a new nature within you? You may lack assurance because you have never actually made this definite commitment.

Once we have, we must continue to confess sins as God reveals them if we want to remain strong and healthy. Repentance involves more than simply acknowledging sin, it involves *believing* and *expecting* God to deliver us, and then *acting* as if it were so. Is there a recurring sin you have confessed but never really believed or expected God to deliver you from? He has truly birthed a new nature in you, as He promised. Will you *believe* Him and begin *acting* as though it were so? Confession, belief, and action must come first; new thoughts and emotions, such as assurance of salvation and conscious fellowship, will follow.

**Transition:** John’s goal in writing his second and third letters was the same as the first: to keep the church strong and healthy in a hostile environment. He wrote his second letter to warn *against supporting* false, itinerant teachers. His third letter encouraged believers to continue *showing support* to true missionaries and teachers.

## II. Communicating Our Position – 2-3 John

### A. Denying Hospitality to Heretics – 2 John

- i. Writer and Recipient: Unlike 1 John, which begins and ends without the conventional identification of the writer and closing greeting, John identified himself in his second and third letters as simply “the elder” (another hint of his age). His second letter is addressed to “the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom [John] loved in the truth.” Various identifications of “the lady” have been attempted. Some believe the “lady” was a local church. Others believe she was an actual woman.
- ii. John’s Exhortations
  1. We can summarize this letter as an exhortation to walk in the truth, love one another, and guard against false teachers. The words “obedience,” “love,” and “truth” all reappear. “Love” and “truth” are each mentioned five times.
  2. John specifically warned the “lady” and her “children” against providing hospitality to the false teachers he had identified in his first letter. His readers needed to remain in the truth (verse 9). To assist the false teachers would have been equivalent to “shar[ing] in their wicked work” (verse 11). To refuse to support their ministries was actually the most loving thing they could do!
- iii. Application of Warning for Today: Some have taken John’s warning to mean that they should not open the doors of their homes when people who promote false religions knock on them, but this interpretation is too superficial. The nature of John’s warning is against any appearance of subsidizing or supporting the ministries of false teachers. For example, we must be careful not to publicly recognize visiting missionaries and teachers in our churches (much less give them a platform for influence) until they have been properly vetted.

### B. Offering Hospitality for True Teachers – 3 John

- i. Recipient: John’s third letter was addressed to an individual named Gaius. The name Gaius appears in other New Testament writings (Acts 19:29, Romans 16:23), but it was a common name. Apparently, the Gaius to whom John wrote was a leader in one of the local congregations. John expressed his love for this man repeatedly in the letter (verses 1, 2, 5, 11). It begins with a commendation for faithfully walking in the truth.

ii. Content

1. *Hospitality*: The theme of hospitality from 2 John is repeated in his third letter, except as an affirmation this time, rather than as a warning. Gaius must have taken in missionaries who traveled and taught “for the sake of the Name” (verse 7) with regularity. They were strangers to Gaius (verse 5), not friends or relatives, yet John had heard about the love Gaius showed them (verse 6) and commended him for supporting these teachers of truth (verses 5, 8).
  2. *Diotrephes and Demetrius*: In verses 9-12, John spoke of two men who were known in the churches and were probably leaders.
    - a. The first was named Diotrephes. It seems that he had received a letter from John but had refused to share it with the church, even speaking slanderously of John. John said Diotrephes “loved to be first” (verse 9). Perhaps he did not want his congregation to prefer any teacher to himself.
    - b. The second man was Demetrius. Although we know nothing else about him, John indicated that the churches in that time and area knew him well. John considered Demetrius a keeper of truth. In fact, he said “the truth itself” spoke well of him (his conduct squared with the gospel<sup>vi</sup>).
  3. *Truth*: John emphasized truth again in this letter. The word appears six times.
- iii. Closing: John concluded both his second and third letters by saying he had more to tell them but wanted to convey it in person.

**Summary Statement:** John’s first letter told believers how to have assurance about their position in Christ. His second and third letters urged believers to communicate their position in Christ in two very specific ways: by lovingly supporting true servants of the gospel and by refusing to support the ministries of false teachers. These were evidences that their lives were built on truth and love.

**Principle:** *A strong, healthy family is built on truth and love.*

2 John 3 says, “Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, will be with us *in truth and love*.” In order to keep our churches and ourselves healthy, truth and love must be equally maintained.

The late Christian pastor and teacher Ray Stedman wrote the following:

*Someone once said that a well-balanced Christian life contains salt and sugar. Salt is truth. Sugar is love. Some Christians want only the salt, and so these salty Christians go around scattering their salt wherever they go. They are all truth, no love. They are full of doctrines, dogmas, and laws. They are cold and judgmental, having no concern for the feelings, needs, or hurts of others. They defend the truth at the expense of love... The truth is all that matters.*

*Others are sugar bowls. They are all love, no truth. They would never confront anyone caught in sin because that would involve telling that person a hard truth – even if it were for that person’s own good and for the good of the church. We all know people who only want sugar from their brothers and sisters... They say, “Give me grace, love, acceptance – but don’t hold me accountable, don’t confront me when I stray... Don’t tell me I have to change; that’s too judgmental! Keep your salt. All I want is sugar.”<sup>vii</sup>*

**Application:** If we want to be strong and healthy Christians, we must learn to balance truth and love. If we want our churches and Christian organizations to be strong and healthy, we need to communicate with love and truthfulness. Are you a “saltshaker” or a “sugar bowl”? You might not be one or the other exclusively, but in hearing these descriptions, you probably identified your tendency.

In Ephesians 4, Paul affirmed that speaking the truth in love is essential to the growth and maturity of Christ’s Church (4:15). What do you need to do to bring these two qualities into balance in your life (and in the life of your church or ministry) so that the body of Christ remains strong and healthy in the hostile environment that surrounds us today? Is there someone to whom you must confess a lie? Have you been inadvertently slighted and need to overlook it in love? Is there someone who you must lovingly confront with truth? When that time comes, we must first make sure we are in the truth (correct in our admonition) and our motive is the other person’s welfare, not just our own (Matthew 7:3).

## Conclusion

John wrote three letters about staying strong and healthy in a hostile environment. If we wait until worldly philosophies and false teaching attack our families and churches (as they inevitably will – or in many cases, already are), it may be too late and someone will probably be lost. Are we enjoying conscious fellowship with God? Are we characterized by love and truthfulness? These are the “last days.” *Now* is the time to take our spiritual temperature.

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- <sup>ii</sup> Akin, D. L. (2001). *1, 2, 3 John* (Vol. 38, p. 143). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
- <sup>iii</sup> Court, J. M. (1982), ‘Blessed Assurance?’ *Journal of Theological Studies*, 33 (p. 512).
- <sup>iv</sup> Kaiser, W. C., Jr., Davids, P. H., Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (p. 740). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.
- <sup>v</sup> Kaiser, W. C., Jr., Davids, P. H., Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (p. 743). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.
- <sup>vi</sup> Morris, L. L. (1994). 2 and 3 John. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed., p. 1413). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.
- <sup>vii</sup> Stedman, Ray (1997). *Adventuring Through the Bible, Second Edition* (pp. 844-45). Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House.