

Title: 1 JOHN: The Fruit of Fellowship with Christ
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1 JOHN: The Fruit of Fellowship with Christ

by Ray C. Stedman

There are two of Jesus' disciples whom I would particularly like to have known in the days of their earthly life. One is Peter, and the other is John. I like these two men. I am especially impressed by the change that fellowship with the Lord Jesus produced in their lives. This is what intrigues me about these two.

Peter, as you know, was erratic, impulsive, brash. As someone has well said, "Whenever Peter enters a scene, it's always with a thud." He seems to have a gift for putting his foot in his mouth – he suffered from hoof-in-mouth disease. Yet the Lord made him a steady, stable, dependable rock, as his name implies. He became a rallying point, a gathering point for the Christians in the days of the persecutions which broke out in the 1st century. It was only because he was with the Lord, and knew the Lord. Most of the change took place after the Lord's death and resurrection, however, so we do not need to feel that it was the personal presence of Jesus that changed these men. He changed them after he died and rose again, just as he can change us.

John was the other one who was dramatically changed by our Lord. He was a young man, the youngest of all the disciples. In fact, many scholars feel that he was a teenager when he first started to follow the Lord. Perhaps he was seventeen or eighteen years of age. Along with his brother, James, he was a hot-headed young man, given to sharp and impulsive utterances with a tendency toward blowing off steam. He was probably a

loudmouth, because Jesus nicknamed him 'Son of Thunder.' That was our Lord's gentle way of labeling John's problem. He just kept the thunder rolling all the time. So our Lord called both James and John "Sons of Thunder," {Mark 3:17}. But John became the apostle of love. He was noted for his gentleness and his graciousness and his goodness. He was called "the virgin." As far as we know, he never married. There is no record that he ever did. But he was called "virgin" primarily because of the purity of his life. He became a man who was characterized by such an outstanding devotion and love for the Lord Jesus, that all his life he was singled out as the apostle of love.

Now it is this John who writes these letters to us. You may know that this first letter of John is possibly the last of the New Testament to be written. It may well have been written after the Gospel of John. It is perhaps, therefore, the last word we have from the apostles. It undoubtedly comes from near the close of the 1st century, perhaps even the year 100 A.D., as some scholars tell us. It was written from the city of Ephesus, where John spent the latter years of his life.

It was possibly written to the Christians in this city of Ephesus, who were facing (as we are) dangers and difficulties of living in a godless, pagan world, given over to the worship of sex and to licentious practices, lovers of human wisdom (as all these Greek cities were) and especially desirous of exalting man and his abilities. Now that sounds very much like our modern western world, doesn't

it? First John was written to people in this kind of situation then, and therefore it has a lot to say to us.

In one of the commentaries of First John, the author says, “The Epistle of First John defies outlining.” For many years, I would have agreed with that statement. I thought John was kind of a rambler. He just wrote on and changed the subject frequently. It did not look as if there was any rhyme or reason to his letter. But as I preached through a series of thirty-five messages on this letter, I began to see its makeup.

John is concerned about one thing, primarily, and that is *authentic Christianity*! I suppose that even as early as the close of the 1st century, some of the dullness and deadness and drabness with which Christianity has sometimes been plagued, had begun to appear. The freshness, the vitality, the newness, the excitement, the drama of the Christian faith had begun to lose its glow and its glamour. John, therefore, is led of God to call people back to the vital things, the things that make for real life. So he is concerned about an authentic Christian manifestation, and authentic Christianity is always made up of the same three elements. The body of this letter of First John is an emphasis upon the three essential things that make Christianity genuinely Christian. They are truth, righteousness, and love. Those three, held in perfect balance, are a sign of genuine Christianity. These become, therefore, the marks that John emphasizes as proof to anyone that he or she is a Christian. The letter gives us a wonderful measuring stick whereby we can test our own lives:

- How are we doing?
- Do we fulfill the qualifications?
- Do we manifest truth, righteousness and love?

There is a prelude that I will discuss in a minute, but beginning at Verse 18 of Chapter 2, and carrying on through Chapter 4, Verse 21, you have his emphasis on these three things: truth, righteousness and love.

But before he begins that, he gives us a prelude, which is really the key to the way truth, righteousness and love can be made manifest in your life. There is a relationship that is necessary. That relationship John terms **fellowship with Christ** – oneness with him, an identification of your life with

Jesus Christ. Now, if you do not have that you cannot produce righteousness, truth and love. It is impossible.

Someone has said that it is possible to search through all the writings of Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Confucius and Buddha, and other great world leaders of moral and ethical thought, to find everything that is written in the New Testament that exhorts man as to what to do. In other words, if all you need is good advice, you do not need the Bible. You can get plenty of good advice from these other religions. But one thing these other leaders do not give you is the how. How! That is what John is talking about.

How do you follow this good advice? You know the Golden Rule is not found only in the New Testament. You find an expression of the Golden Rule, always in a negative form, in other religions: “Do not do to others as you do not want them to do to you.” Ah, but in Christ you find the secret of how! It is by unity with him – union with him, fellowship with the Lord Jesus – he dwelling in you and you dwelling in him. That is what John begins to talk about.

He says from the very beginning that he has a personal experience of this. “I saw him,” he says. “I felt him. I heard him. I touched him. He was a real person; there was nothing phony or sham about him. In the fellowship of his life, I found it possible to begin to love, to walk in truth, in obedient righteousness with God,” {cf, 1 Jn 1:1-2}. That is the heart and key to this letter, as he begins with this note of fellowship with Jesus Christ.

You will notice that all through this letter he emphasizes the fact that Jesus appeared in history. That is the first theme he talks about under the heading of **truth**. The truth about Jesus is that he is God and man. He is both –

- the eternal God, linked with all the great revelations of the Old Testament that mark out the being and character of God,
- and he is man, having come in the flesh, he lived among us, was a man, suffered as a man, died as a man.

All this, so that we might share his life, his divine nature.

Now this was opposed to a philosophy that was very current in John's day. It was what we call *gnosticism*. The nearest thing to it today is Christian Science which is almost pure gnosticism. Gnosticism taught that matter is evil and spirit is good. Therefore, the spirit of man is imprisoned in an evil body; the purpose of this life is to teach us how to somehow rise above the evil of our body and release the spirit from the evil, material body, thus achieving nirvana – or heaven, or whatever you want to call it.

Now, you will notice, that is still very commonly accepted in many places. It is against that idea that John writes, and says, "Now don't follow that" because Jesus has come in truth. The truth about Jesus is that he came as God, became man, and anybody who does not say that about Jesus Christ is a liar.

The problem was that there were many people back in those days who were wonderful. They gave the appearance of being suave and gentle and thoughtful and courteous. They were not out to destroy Christianity; they were out to improve upon it. So they just dropped out, de-emphasized some of the things that the New Testament says about Jesus and emphasized others that agreed with what they wanted to teach. Thus, they attempted to make Christianity intellectually respectable.

This process is still going on today. But John says that if you give way to this, if you succumb to this kind of delusion, you will find that you have been tricked and end up not a Christian at all. You will be following a lie and become a victim of a sham and a delusion. The results of that are terrible.

In the second section, the apostle emphasized **righteousness**. Christianity is not just signing the doctrine or creed. It is not just writing your name under a statement of belief – "We believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his Son, our Lord who suffered under Pontius Pilate and was crucified, dead, and buried, and on the third day..." and so on. It is not that; it is more than truth; it is also righteousness. It means that your behavior changes. The emphasis of John, as with all the writers of the New Testament, is this: "Look," he says, "if you really have Jesus Christ living in you, you can't be the same person. You cannot go on living in sin, doing wrong things, ly-

ing and stealing, living in sexual immorality. You cannot do it."

You see, these Gnostics were saying, "Look, if spirit is good and matter is evil, and our bodies are matter, then the only thing that counts is the spirit. What you do with your body doesn't make any difference. So if you want to indulge the lusts of it, go ahead. It won't affect your spiritual standing with God." As a result they were turning (as Jude puts it) the grace of God into licentiousness {Jude 1:4 RSV}. People were being taught, Christians were being taught, that they could practice all the immorality of their day, and God would still treat them exactly the same. It would not change their relationship one whit. But John says,

No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. {1 Jn 3:9 RSV}

The two are incompatible. You cannot have the Holy Spirit living in you and live an unholy life. If you live the unholy life and profess to be a Christian, you are a liar, says John. He is very blunt about it.

Yet, there is still a third thing. It is easy for Christians to say today, "Well, yes, this is true. We've got to teach the truth, obey the truth, and believe the truth about Christ. And of course, we've got to stop doing the things the world is doing." That is as far as they go. Have you heard Christians get up and testify along this line? They say, "I used to smoke and drink and dance and go to the movies and play cards and gamble and all these terrible things. But I don't do any of them any more. I believe in the Lord. I've stopped all these things." They leave the impression that it ought to make everyone become a Christian, to see such a tremendous change. But what you discover, soon enough, is that people are not a bit impressed by what you have stopped doing. Not the least bit. Why, worldlings can stop doing these things if they have a good reason. And they do it. If that is the basis of your Christian testimony, you have got nothing more to say than they do. No, the world is not a bit impressed by stopping something.

What does impress them is seeing you do something they cannot do. That is **love**. That is why John says that the third mark of a genuine Christian is that he begins to love – not those that

love him (anybody can do that, is Jesus' remark) – but beginning

- to love those who do not love you,
- to treat kindly those who mistreat you,
- to return good for evil and to pray for those who spitefully use you,
- to welcome and treat kindly those who are against you and are trying to hurt you.

This is the mark, isn't it?

You no longer treat those who have needs around you with callous indifference, but you respond to them and do not shut them out of your life. John says, "If a man comes to your door and says, 'I am hungry, and I don't have anything to wear,' and you have what he needs, and you say to him, 'Well, that's all right brother. We'll pray for you. Go away and be filled and be warmed,' it is ridiculous to say that the love of God dwells in you." It is absurd. How can you say that? If you do not love your brother whom you can see, how can you say that you love God whom you don't see?" {cf, 1 Jn 4:20}. See how practical he gets in these matters?

So he emphasized that fellowship with the Lord Jesus, a oneness, a day-by-day walk with him, opening your heart to his word, letting his light shine upon you – thus letting yourself be changed by the power of Christ – will result in truth about Jesus righteousness in your personal behavior and love toward your brothers, your fellow members of the human race, as well as those fellow members of the church of God.

Then the final result, and the closing note of the letter, is **assurance**. You know things with a knowledge that is unshakable, which nobody can shatter, and no rational arguments will disturb. You know that what God has told you is true. You know that what he has revealed about the world is true. You have a continually growing certainty that underlies your life. As we read in John's closing note:

We know that one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. {1 Jn 5:18 RSV}

That is righteousness. We know, he says, that we are of God, the very nature and being of God – the God who is love – and that the whole world is in the power of the evil one. That is why they cannot love. They talk about it and they want it. They search for it, but they cannot find it – because God is love. We know that we are of God, he says,

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. {1 Jn 5:20 RSV}

What a declaration that is, in an age when everybody is telling us that you cannot know anything for sure, that nobody knows anything for certain. John says that we do. We know. We have been given an understanding.

Here is his final word and it is such an important one. One that I think ought to ring in our ears every day:

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. (1 Jn 5:21)

Why? Well, because the first and great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," {Matt 22:37b RSV}. That is the chief end of man. And idolatry is loving something else as God. What is an idol? It is a substitute God. Your God is

- what you get excited about,
- what you save your money for,
- what you spend it on,

that is your God.

What is important to you, that is your God.

Little children – you who have found the true God – keep yourselves from these secondary idols, these substitute gods that demand your attention. Give yourself, alone, to the One who can fulfill in you all your heart's desires. It is a great word, isn't it? – the word that will lead us safely through all the difficulties along our path.

Prayer:

Our Father, you know the many idols that loom before us each day: the god of pleasure; the god of selfishness; the god Narcissus, who makes us love ourselves, admire ourselves, look to ourselves; the god of love, Venus, how we follow her, Lord, and exalt her when we should not; the god Bacchus, who makes us revel in pleasure as if that were the chief end in life, as if fun were the reason for living. Lord, deliver us from these gods, these false gods, that will

rob us of our faith, of our love for humanity. Make us fall more truly in love with the Lord Jesus who alone is the only true God, who has come to give us an understanding of ourselves and the world around us, and has come to teach us righteousness and how to love with a heart that is self-giving instead of self-serving. These things we ask, Lord, in this 20th century hour, knowing that we are exposed to the same dangers that they were in the 1st century, and so desperately needing your power. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.