

# **Dr. Robert Yarbrough, The Johannine Epistles, Session 5, Section 1: 1 John - Full Scale Faith, Central Burden [1 John 1:1-2:6]**

This is Dr. Robert Yarbrough and his teaching on the Johannine Epistles, Balancing Life in Christ. This is Session 5, 1 John, Full Scale Faith, Section 1:1:1-2:6, Central Burden.

Today we begin our look at 1 John, and in previous lectures we've looked at introductory issues surrounding 1, 2, and 3 John, and there are two lectures that I've given on themes, theological themes, in 1, 2, and 3 John, and then I gave a lecture on 3 John.

I called it Letter to a Trusted Friend, that friend was Gaius, and then a lecture on 2 John. I called it Letter to a Trusted Church. This was John's letter to a church that I think Gaius probably was part of and may have received not only the letter to the church, 2 John, but also another letter, 1 John, that John wrote for reading an application in that church, and perhaps in churches in the whole area of Asia Minor.

So, we come to the next lecture, which is going to begin looking at 1 John, and I'm calling this series Balancing Life in Christ. These three letters together assume and they affirm a life in Christ that's a balance between different factors, and I'll talk about that in just a minute, but as we look at 1 John, I'm calling it Full Scale Faith. 1 John is a book about full scale believing in Christ, believing in God, Father, Son, and Spirit, and Father, Son, and Spirit are all mentioned in 1 John, and I'm going to pray in just a minute, but I want us to start out by noting something quite striking about 1 John, and it's also a feature of John's Gospel.

When you graph out the occurrences of the word, the noun, and the verb for love, the noun *agape*, the verb *agapao*, you get a graph that looks like this, and on the left-hand side you see Matthew, and then you see Mark, Luke, John, and over John you see that column sprouts up, and then it stays pretty low. Ephesians goes up a little bit, but you get over to 1 John, and it shoots up again, and those columns that are so high are the columns for John and for 1 John, and they map out the frequency of reference to love, the use of the word love. So you may have heard John called the Apostle of Love, and that's not just because he's called the Beloved Apostle in John's Gospel, it's because if you study his writings in comparison with any other writings in the whole New Testament, and I'm sure in the whole New Testament, and I'm sure in the Old Testament too, there's no comparing how often John uses this word and reverts back to this idea of loving God or the noun love in connection with God.

So, let's pause in prayer and we'll thank God for his love. Heavenly Father, thank you for the love that you've shown in sending your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and thank you for this letter that testifies to him so intensely and densely and at length, and we pray that by your presence with us that we could do some justice to the message that is here for everyone who reads and hears this epistle. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

So, how do we break down 1 John? How do we divide it? And of course, in the English language tradition, we have chapters and verses, and that's one way to do it. When I have studied 1 John at length, what I've paid attention to in the Greek text, you can see there are markers for how the Eastern Church, the Greek Church, over the many centuries when the Latin Church didn't know the Greek text, the Greek Church, often called the Byzantine Church, they were using Greek the whole time. They were the Greek-speaking Church.

And before we had chapter divisions in our English language tradition, or even the Latin language tradition of the Vulgate, they had divisions, and they had divided 1 John into seven portions. And the first portion began, of course, in 1 1, and the second began in chapter 2, the third also began in chapter 2, and so forth. So you have seven sections.

And they don't name what's in the section, and one of the reasons they made these sectionings was so they could refer to them, like go to section 3 or 4 or 7 or whatever, but also because they marked out the readings that they used in church. The Byzantine Church reads a lot of scriptures in their worship, and so these are called lectionary readings or lectionary markers. And the first division, I'm calling it the central burden, God is light.

The central burden, the epistle, is the nature of God. And the reason I think that John does this is because he's writing to a situation in which it's the Roman world. Everybody believes in God and gods.

There was a polytheistic society, but a lot of darkness was connected with human life. And Greco-Roman religion, religion in the Roman Empire, didn't have scriptures, and it didn't talk about morals or ethics. It talked about religious experience, and it talked about maybe getting help from some god or goddess with your health, with your trip, or with a relationship.

But you didn't have a personal relationship with a god or a goddess. These gods or goddesses didn't commune with you personally. They certainly weren't Savior gods in the sense of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God of the Lord Jesus Christ, who promises and who made the earth and who comes into a personal relationship of faith and saves a people and is redeeming the world.

There's nothing really close to that in the Greco-Roman world. So John, in writing 1 John, when he finally, after his introduction, he'll finally get to a point saying, this is the message that we receive and that we announce to you. God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

I'm calling that the central burden of 1 John, and we'll get to that in just a minute. Two other things, though, that I need to touch on. One is John's conception of what I'll call the gospel identity.

He's writing to people whom we would call Christians. He never calls them Christians. He calls them little children or children, but I think it's good to remind ourselves of how John conceives of Christian identity and the Christian experience, because it's summed up in his gospel in chapter 1, and we're going to see this again and again in 1 John.

He talks about being born of God, and he talks about things like faith and the love of God, and it's important to know how he thinks this comes about, and it comes about, we can say, first of all, through believing in the name of Christ. And 1 John, excuse me, John's gospel, chapter 1, verse 12, says, to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, and that is the true identity of Jesus, the Son of God, who died for sin and rose, to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right or the authorization to become children of God. So, God becomes their father, they become his children, they become brothers and sisters, they become a family community through faith in Christ.

But then it further defines this idea of being children of God who believe, because that makes it sound like this is all something we do, like we volunteer and we believe, and we kind of have done it. We've made ourselves God's children by what we've done. But then in the next verse he says, these children were born not of blood, not of ethnicity, nor of the will of the flesh, somebody decided to have a child, nor of the will of man, but of God, born of God.

And you've got here what some people call compatibilism. You've got the idea of, we have agency and we believe in Christ, and so we become children of God. On the other hand, God has even greater agency, and we're born not of our own will.

Behind the scenes of our believing in God, there is something more fundamental and something mysterious at work, by which we hear and it registers and we believe the gospel message, when other people around us don't. Many times in families you get one brother or sister that does believe, but the other one doesn't. Or in a marriage, you'll get two people going maybe to the same church, and one of them hears the gospel and becomes a Christian, the other person doesn't hear, and they don't believe.

So, you could say, well, they didn't believe because they decided not to believe. That's their decision, and that's true. But it's also true that God is at work behind the scenes, and especially for those who do believe, they can't take credit for it and say, well, I saved myself because I did the thing that qualifies me.

It merits the gift of forgiveness from God. So, John conceives of gospel identity as a gift of God, a work of God. It's God's will, somehow working through the gospel message, that bestows on believers a status they don't deserve.

We don't deserve God's forgiveness, but he offers it to us, and he does what's necessary for it to claim us and to transform us and to graft us into this family where he has a further will for us to live for his glory. Corollaries to this are bullet points on my little handout here: receiving Christ results from and in a staggering quality of divine love, and we just saw that in the graph. You know, we don't really know God until we come into a relationship with him through this gospel message, but when we do encounter God, suddenly there's a love of God that we were strangers to before that begins to enter into our life and change our life, and that's a lifelong process.

And when we receive Christ, not only do we receive new resources of love, but we enter into a picture that we can depict with a pretty complicated chart, and I have to go back now to my earlier chart that had love on one page, and on another page it has a picture, and let me quit this file because sometimes it freezes and it has just frozen, and I will restart it. We'll just take a second, and then I can get it to as big of a picture as it will allow me to make. That's bigger, and that's about as big as we can make it.

So, this is a picture of the balanced Christian life, and let me explain. There's a left-right line, and that's the line of believing, or the line of faith, or the line of doctrine, the line of what it is that the gospel message contains, and we might remember words in the Bible like, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved. So, on the left-hand side of that horizontal line, that would be unbelief, and so you're not a Christian, you're not in faith, but you hear the gospel message, and imagine that that vector is an arrow.

You go from unbelief to belief, and so that's a Christian. You're saved through faith. You hear what Christ did, and you accept it, and you entrust yourself to that, and you're saved.

But we don't have to go very far in life, we don't have to go very far in the Bible to see that there's a problem sometimes that people claim to have faith, but then their life is out of sync with what they say they believe. And so let's put an up-and-down line, and let's call that line works, and that's a line of obedience, that's a line of ethics. And so if you take the X and the Y, you get four quadrants, and the quadrant

you would want to be in is the quadrant to the right in belief, and the quadrant above in works.

So that upper right-hand quadrant would be the quadrant you want to be in. You wouldn't want to be in that quadrant, because you would have work but no faith. You wouldn't want to be in this quadrant, because you'd have faith but no works.

You wouldn't be over here because you have no faith or works. And so maybe you've thought about this yourself, because when you read the book of James, he talks about the nature of faith, and how faith and works need to work together, and it's all very true. But many years ago, especially working with college students, a lot of times, college students want to talk about assurance of faith, and they were pretty good kids, and they were living pretty good lives, but they didn't have assurance.

And I was reading in the Sermon on the Mount, and there's a place in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, this is Matthew 7, I think, he says, many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord. Well, there's that horizontal line. Lord, Lord, that's faith.

Did we not do mighty things? Well, that works. So that's X and Y. And they list out some of the miracles they did, and great things they did in his name. So faith and works.

But then Jesus says, I never knew you. So this immediately kind of rang a bell in my mind, not only for working with students, but also doing pastoral work, where you have people who are moral people, and they go to church, they have Christian beliefs, and you know, they're not robbing banks or killing anybody. But there's no real passion for God.

There's no love necessarily for other people. And then I introduced another line into this picture. And that line is the line of relationship, a personal relationship.

Call it love. And this is not a picture that says, these are the three things you have to do to be a Christian: you have to believe, and you have to work, and you have to love. I'm looking at it from the standpoint of the work of God, when God, through his word, saves us through the message of Christ.

The Bible teaches that, you know, God transforms our hearts. And through this work of God, by which we believe, our behavior begins to change, because now God is he's putting a full court press on us. He wants a relationship with us.

And we begin to learn his commands, maybe in ways we hadn't learned them before. We find ourselves feeling a compulsion to do what we know pleases God. But we also suddenly have an interior relationship with God.

You know, we might have believed in God before, but now he's like, he's in our head, he's in our heart. We find ourselves wanting to grow in a personal relationship with God. And this is the Christian life.

This is the work of the gospel message, through which faith comes into our lives in a way it wasn't before. A faith that actualizes the presence of the living God. And the living God, by his commandments and by his presence with us, gives us an interior desire to do the things that we're learning to please him, and that cause him to delight in us.

And that also is of service to him, and service to other people. And this is all in a relational context. So we have a rapport with God, who of course, has come to this earth in Jesus.

And the great thing about this is, when Jesus says, many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not do? And I will say, I never knew you. We know him. I call this the X is doctrine, the Y is works, and I call it the Z coordinate.

The Z coordinate is love. The Z coordinate is the coordinate of interpersonal relationships. When we stand before Christ, he won't say, I never knew you, because we've known him for a long time.

We have a relationship with him through faith that results in changed behavior. And it also results in expressions of love. Now, these three things all intertwine and overlap.

And as we look at 1 John again, and again, and again, we'll see him talking about love, and talking about commandments, and talking about believing. And if you isolate verses, you can make it sound like, oh, it's all about love. That's all that matters is love.

But then another verse will say, all that matters is works. You just need to love your brother, help your brother, and give him. And then other verses say, it's faith.

And it's a real problem in 1 John, because it makes it sound like he's contradicting himself. But what you've got to keep in mind is that any time he's talking about one of these three, he's assuming the other two. He's assuming the work of God such that through faith, transformed behavior, and relationship with God, we're living a different quality of life.

We're living the life of the person who is born of God. And we always say B-O-R-N. And that's right, because it has to do with, you know, he becomes our divine parent, our father.

But you could also say B-O-R-N-E, you know, carried along by, propelled by, informed by, filled by. And God is working out his salvation in our lives as we work out our salvation from our side. We have agency, we have responsibility.

So, this is not a passive relationship, and this is an active relationship. But it works because of who God is and his power and his overpowering will as he puts his gentle, loving hand on us and makes sure that we go in the direction that we have said we wanted to when we said, I have decided to follow Jesus. So, I won't spend a whole lot more time on this box, but if you followed it out, there are four compartments above the theoretical horizontal plane, and there are four below.

So, you got eight compartments that you could be in. And in one compartment, you would have authentic belief, you would have appropriate obedience, and you would have a relationship, you would have love. You know, that's the place of the true believer.

But as you study First John, you'll see that at times he implies people don't have true faith. You know, they deny that Jesus came in the flesh. That's a faith problem.

They may be moral people, they may be obeying commands and expressing love, but they're denying Jesus. That's a problem. Or they may have a plausible-sounding faith, and they may be pretty obedient people, but they don't love their brother.

Some verses talk about anybody who has the world's goods and doesn't care for their brother, that person's a liar. Well, that's not a Christian characteristic. There's another box, it's Octant 4 on the map here, where you've got a plausible sounding belief, and maybe you're a loving person, but you're disobeying God.

You know, you're violating God's commandments. That's a problem. There's a fifth domain, where the love appears to be genuine, but there's no Christian belief, and there's no real obedience.

And, you know, sometimes we run into people who they're religious and they're very loving. They're very warm-hearted people. And it may be dogs, and it may be people, and it may be the poor, or, you know, there's all kinds, they just love, love, love, but they're not interested in Christianity, at least not in any serious way, doctrinally.

And their moral life might be a shambles from a Christian point of view, but they have love. And then they may have the same situation where you have obedience and no belief and deficient love. I like the bumper sticker I saw some years ago.

It said, deed before creed, which means I really don't care what anybody believes. I just care how you live. And, you know, that's when you encounter people.

That's what matters. That's all that matters. But for John, these three things are intertwined.

When the gospel claims a person's heart and will, God enters in in such a way that he grows our trust in Christ and what he has done. He grows our knowledge of him relationally, because he is a real living being who's transcendent and infinite, but also is personal and interior to everybody who knows him through faith in Christ. And this also changes our behavior.

So, keep those three things in mind as we look at 1 John, because they are all part of what God is doing through the gospel message. Well, when we look at 1 John, we see first he announces his authority and his purpose, that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we've seen with our eyes, which we've looked upon and touched with our hands concerning the word of life. And we'll see that this word of life is Jesus Christ.

The life was made manifest. It became visible. It was revealed.

And we have seen it and testified to it. That's John and the other disciples who saw Jesus. And we proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father, that is the Son of God before the incarnation, and was made manifest to us.

He took on flesh by the Virgin Mary and came and lived. That which we have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us. And indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. Now, you'll notice when I cite these Bible verses in yellow, the words for Father or Son or God or Jesus or Christ or Spirit, if it's the Holy Spirit, whenever I think of it, and I think I've done it all through the book, I put them in red just to remind us of the preponderance of reference to God in 1 John. Because, as I said in an earlier lecture, people get caught up in the social setting and in the relationships between people, and people forget that the thing John talks the most about is God.

So, this is a theocentric and a Christocentric book, not an anthropocentric book that's mainly talking about people and their problems. But in those verses we just read, we see, number one, that the incarnation is true and real. The Son had an existence in and with the Father.

They are united. They are one. There are not two gods or three gods, there is one God.

But that God who exists outside of spacetime and matter and is transcendent, he's a God with a relationship within himself. And in his richness and fullness, the Son of



God, we call that the second person of the Trinity, took on flesh and was born. And John testifies to what they've looked on and touched and seen and handled and so forth and heard.

Note, secondly, John believes that eyewitnesses are sufficient proof. Moses taught, and God taught Moses, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses, facts should be confirmed. One witness can't confirm anything, but multiple witnesses can.

And so, there were multiple witnesses, both in terms of disciples, but also in terms of God witnessing to himself, as Jesus teaches in John's Gospel in John chapter 5. He talks about all the witnesses to his identity. The witness of scripture, the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of the Father, the witness of his mighty works. These and other manifestations are sufficient proof.

People can deny what they see. But they're sufficient proof of Jesus' true identity. And then there's a goal that John expresses, and that goal is joyful fellowship.

We're writing these things so that our joy may be complete. A lot of people are uneasy about religion, and they're unwilling to think about Christianity because they think it's a buzz killer. But actually, the deepest gratification we can know as human beings is to be at peace with our God in this world and with a view to the next.

And this is the complete joy that Jesus promised and the joy that John has been sampling now for decades as he writes this, and it's the joy that he commends to readers. Then we get the main burden of the epistle, which is the character of God. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you.

So, to summarize those previous four verses, God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. And this is simply saying that there's a quality of God, there's an activity of God. You know, the quality is one of holiness.

He's not a human being in his transcendent glory. God is unique. There's nothing like God.

He took on human form in Christ, but God himself is not a big man out in space somewhere. God is a mysterious, transcendent, glorious being, and light is a word that is often associated with God in scripture because there's this blinding radiance. When even the edge of God's presence is glimpsed in the created world, people turn their faces away.

Sometimes they fall on their faces, and the light symbolizes his purity, the light symbolizes his excellence, the light symbolizes his perfection, the light symbolizes his transcendence from what we are. We are created beings. He is not a created being.

He's an eternal being, and then he's a God who acts. He does things, and these things have implications for the community that John addresses. If God is light, and he is, then there are things going on in the community that John's writing to, the churches he's writing to.

There are things going on that are out of sync with God being light. If you're claiming to follow God, but you're doing this, or you're teaching this, there's something wrong. So, I want to start out, John says, by saying this is who God is.

This is who we're dealing with. This is the message, and everything else is going to follow from that, we could say, the theological bedrock of the nature and the activity of God. There are implications of God's character for the Christian life.

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, that means sinning, we lie, and we don't practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his son, cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and forgives us our sins, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. Verse 10, if we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. Two observations about those verses, verses 6, 8, and 10, seem to imply a bogus confession of God.

God is light. But we've got people that are walking in darkness, apparently, and then they're denying that there's a problem. They're denying their sin.

And a lot of 1 John deals with symptoms of this dislocation between who God is, and what people, either in these churches, or who have left these churches, or who are affecting these churches, they are teaching things, they are acting in certain ways that are out of sync with the nature of God. Another observation from these verses, and this is something positive, verses 7 and 9 point the way toward true fellowship with God. Verse 7 talks about walking in the light.

That would be obeying God. That would be responding to a relationship with God. It would be believing the truth about God.

If we walk in the light, like he is in the light, we have fellowship with each other. And the sins that may be part of our life are dealt with by the blood of Jesus. He cleanses us.

And that's on the assumption that we're conscious of our sin, and as we become conscious, we confess it. Verse 9, if we confess our sins, he's faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The final section of this part of 1 John, whose central burden is the nature and the work of God, and how

that should be reflected in the community that John addresses, it's an appeal to readers in the light of God's character.

My little children, this is a pastoral reference. He loves these people. His heart goes out to them.

He's committed to them. He cares. So, my little children, I'm writing these things to you so that you may not sin.

He doesn't want his readers to be guilty of the darkness that he's just implied does exist in some of the people who are in or around this community. I'm writing so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, that is the righteous one, the only human who's ever lived on this earth and did not sin against God, did not break his law, did not violate his relationship with God.

This advocate is at the Father's right hand because he died and defeated sin and death, and he ascended to the right hand of the Father and intercedes for God's people from that place. He is the propitiation for our sins. That means his death satisfied God's judgment or God's wrath.

The Bible says the wages of sin is death. The soul that sins will die. So, because of our sinfulness, there's going to be judgment unless we get somebody to take that judgment for us, and that's what Jesus did.

And the technical word for that is propitiation. Propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we've come to know him if we keep his commandments, not walking in darkness but walking in the light.

Verse 4, whoever says I know him but does not keep his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him. If you think back to that diagram, the X, Y, and Z diagram, X is the line of belief. I believe in Christ, or I believe in God.

Z is the line of love. I believe in Christ and I love Christ, but I'm not keeping his commandments. John says if that's your situation, you're a liar, and the truth is not in you.

Whoever says I know him but does not keep his commandments is a liar. But whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. The faith, the love, and the obedience are all in sync.

In this way, we may know that we are in him. Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. Now, of course, he's talking here about

the walk of Christ, the sinless life, the life of service, the life of love, the life of worship, the life of integrity of Jesus.

So, to conclude our quick look at 1 John first section, we can draw from these last few verses. Number one, the reasonable goal is for believers not to sin. He's writing so that we may not sin.

Sin and death do not have mastery over the Christian who is living in union with the Lord. If we do sin, then there is a means of grace. We can confess it, and we can be forgiven for it.

He says that Christ died not only for our sins but for the sins of the whole world. And people debate what that means, and I'm just going to say that certainly when it talks about died for our sins, it's talking about dying for people who believe in Christ and are saved. Nobody is saved unless their sins are paid for, and Christ paid for the sins of all believers at all times who come into a relationship with God through faith.

So I call that a special grace benefit, the special grace of salvation through the death of Christ. But John says that this is also the sins of the whole world, and some people have said, well, that means people who believe throughout the whole world. But it doesn't mean that he died for the whole world, and they may be right.

But I have thought that, well, there is a common grace benefit to Christ's death. The fact that Christ was going to die for sins in the Old Testament era and has died for sins since the New Testament era, because of Christ's mission and because God is holding the door open for salvation to people, God's judgment doesn't come down on everybody. God stays his hand of judgment until the fullness of time comes in and Christ returns.

So, I think when he says the sins of the whole world, he's just saying there's a benefit to the whole world whether the world believes in Jesus or not. It's a good thing for all of us that he came and that he died for sins and that, because of his ministry to the world, this world is still operating and there's still a day of grace for anybody who hears the message and wants to believe it. Number three, communion with God or communion with Christ implies compliance with God's will as expressed in commandments.

And I'm going to add the word his here, with his will. I think that's very clear that if we claim to have communion with God, but this is a God who's given us certain commandments and we don't do his commandments, then there's something wrong with that relationship. And finally, God's love and Christian assurance are confirmed through living like Jesus did.

Now, of course, there's an analogy. None of us can live like Jesus did in the sense that we never sin or we're born of a virgin or we came from heaven or we're going to atone for our sins by our death on, by death on a cross. You know, there are a lot of things that are unique to Jesus that we can't emulate and we shouldn't try.

We're not the Messiah. He was the Messiah. But in many ways we can seek to live like Christ did in terms of service, in terms of reverence for God, in terms of seeking God, in terms of a prayer life, in terms of a regard for children, let the little children come to me.

You know, there are lots of ways we can reflect the kindness, the goodness of God that was in Christ in our own far less perfect lives. And so that's the beginning of 1 John, his central burden. God is light and the implications of that for his people.

This is Dr. Robert Yarborough and his teaching on the Johannine Epistles, Balancing Life in Christ. This is Session 5, 1 John, Full-scale Faith, Section 1, 1:1-2:6, Central Burden.