

Dr. Robert Yarbrough, The Johannine Epistles,

Session 2B – Theological Themes in

1, 2, and 3 John

This is Dr. Robert Yarbrough in his teaching on the Johannine Epistles, Balancing Life in Christ. This is session number 2B, Theological Themes in 1, 2, and 3 John.

We continue our study of John's letters, and we're doing so under the heading, The Johannine Epistles, Balancing Life in Christ.

And this is the second part of a look at the theological themes in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, and I'm going to keep those themes up at the top, the title, and so far we've looked at God, we've looked at love, and we looked at knowing as major theological themes. These are three words that occur with the most frequency in John's letters. God is the first most frequent, the verb I love is the second most frequent, and the verb for knowing in an experiential way, generally, is the third most frequent occurring word.

The fourth most frequently occurring word is meno, I remain or abide. This occurs two dozen times in 1st John, three times in 2nd John. And we're looking at what John has to say to the faithful dying, on the one hand, and also to people who are lax, or what we're calling those who have a bloodless religion, a religion that would not call on them to die for their faith.

And let me change my screen just a little bit here, so we can get everything on one page. John's message for the faithful dying, under this heading of remaining, is that God's Word saves us. God's Word that saves us from the start imparts his living presence in us.

So, God's Word saves us in the beginning, but then there's an enduring presence of God with us, and that living Word keeps us close to the Son and to the Father in any and all circumstances. John says to his readers in 1 John 2:24, Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you, or remain in you. And of course, what you hear is a message or a word.

If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. So, God comes to us through the Word, and through our opening ourselves to the Word, we are united with God the Father and Son. So this is a message that would mean a lot to people who are facing persecution, because it would assure them that what's getting them in trouble, which is their status as believers in Jesus Christ through the Word or the Gospel message, that Word which unites them with the Lord and makes them unpopular with people that are trying to

maybe stamp out the Christian community or persecute Christian believers, that Word abides in them, and they in turn have a presence in the Son and the Father.

This is kind of mystical, but you know God is a spirit, and God is beyond our understanding and knowledge. He's not just a simple equation of some kind or just a big cosmic person. You know God is an eternal, transcendent being.

But we and our finitude and our createdness and even our sinfulness through the Word, we're cleansed, and that Word abides and does its work and unites us with God. That's the message of the faithful dying. You have hope.

The message for the lax is, in the current age, many Christians, in quotation marks, decide to depart from the clear teaching of Scripture, the teaching of Christ. And this indicates a lack of a saving relationship with God. And this is especially true if the departure concerns the doctrine of Christ.

John writes to a church in 2nd John verse 9, everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. So, notice the centrality here of abiding.

Abiding or not abiding is very significant for the lax because abiding in God's Word is always a challenge. You know our gravitational pull is too lax. It's too slothful.

It's to mediocrity. And God calls us to, you know, a growing fellowship with Him, and a growing maturity, and a growing effectiveness in service, and a growing delight, and a growing joy, and a growing love. Lots of good and great things that we enjoy with God through Christ, and that we enjoy with other believers.

And we're invited to abide in that. But if we don't abide in it, we go ahead, and I'll explain that a little more when we look at 2nd John. If we go ahead and we don't abide in the teaching of Christ, then we don't have God, whatever our claim is.

So abiding is important. Sticking with where we started in the beginning, which was Jesus Christ crucified and risen, and faith in Him, and then walking in life with Him, and developing that relationship, and that service, and that worship. The fifth most frequent word is kosmos, world, or the created order.

It occurs 23 times in 1st John. The message in that word for the faithful dying is that the world, the world, seems permanent. The world can be very imposing and pitiless.

You don't feel any pity. And if I think to the country where I have the strongest sense of persecution, it would be Sudan, where I spent, you know, a total of many months. And it's often very hot there, and it's very uncomfortable.

And a lot of people, when I was there, didn't have enough to eat. Even clean water was often hard to come by. And so if you're being persecuted, it can seem like there's just no hope.

The world is bigger than you are. It's very imposing and depressing, especially if you're a young person. If you're a Christian in a country where there's persecution of Christians, often you don't have employment possibilities, you don't have educational possibilities, everybody else is going to university, and you may not be allowed to go to university unless you convert to the dominant religion.

So the world can seem permanent, but John's message is that the world is passing, and those who honor God's unchanging will find life in his unchanging presence. The world does not understand this, and it hates those whose highest aim is God's will, and not human aspirations. So expect this antagonism.

God will repay. He will repay your faithfulness, and he will repay the world's opposition. So, 1 John 2:17.

The world is passing away along with its desires, and that word often moves in the direction of sexual desire. It doesn't have to be limited to that, but it certainly includes that. And in much of the world, a lot of life, a lot of energy centers around sensual pleasure.

I haven't checked recently, but over the years, I've heard again and again that the word that's googled the most on the internet is sex. And for some people, that's, you know, one of the main driving forces in their lives. John says the world is passing away with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

God has come into the world through Christ, and he has spoken to the world through his word, but God himself is transcendent. God exists outside of space, time, and matter. And his will is not the will of the world.

The world has its own directions, and its own hankerings, and its own goals. And God wants to redeem this world, and he's at work redeeming it. But when we know Christ, we're introduced to a relationship with God and his intentions, that it affects our intentions.

It changes the direction of our lives in all kinds of ways. But one of the things that comes into our life, and again this is for the faithful dying, 1 John 3:13, do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. And John's gospel has Jesus talking about this, and we see this in the book of Acts various times when Christians are persecuted.

So, with respect to the world, this is John's message. The world's passing away, and you should expect the antagonism of the created order. The message for the lax is that the world is full of religious substitutes and misrepresentations.

The world gives these spirits, these impulses, these convictions, these beliefs, it gives these spirits and their prophets a hearing. You can go on lots of websites and get insight into, you know, what is influencing people right now? What's getting the most hits right now? And John has a message: beware of falling in with religious substitutes and religious misrepresentations. 1st John 4.1, Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

For many false prophets have gone out into the world. You know, there are many individuals who are full of ideas and impulses and convictions that are not going to lead people to the true and living God. He goes on to say in 1st John 4.5, they, these people of non-biblical convictions, are from the world. Therefore, they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.

God's people are people who have listened to God's word, and that word moves them into a relationship with God, and it changes their position in the world. You could even say they live in another world. They live in two worlds at once.

There's the world of the kingdom of God, and then there's the world of, well, we all know what the world is, but 1st John is full of this theological theme of conflicting worlds. Another important theological concept and word in John's letters is Son. It occurs 22 times.

It's always capitalized in the ESV, which means it's talking about Jesus. It's the major word for Jesus or Christ in John's letters is Son. The message for the faithful dying is that believing in the Son carries the assurance of eternal life, because he is the true God and eternal life.

Now, it's always very careful when we talk about eternal life to remember it's not just talking about heaven. It's not just talking about the duration of life, which is eternity in the future. I mean, that's a wonderful truth, but the way eternal life is presented in John's gospel, it's not just eschatological.

It's not just relating to the end, but it's also what's sometimes called realized, that the quality of life now is enhanced. It's transformed through the presence of Christ here and now, so we're not just, you know, waiting to die to enjoy eternal life. The fruit of eternal life is already seen in this life, and believing in the Son carries the assurance of that life.

This is the testimony, it says in 1 John 5, beginning in verse 11. This is the testimony or the witness that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. I write these

things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

This life that you're living is a foreshadowing of the life with God that you will live in the age to come. A few verses later in 5:20, John writes, We know that the Son of God has come, and he has given us understanding. It's an unusual word for knowledge there.

He's given us understanding so that we may know him who is true. I think you're going to translate that word as "understanding." He's given us insight.

It's just not, you know, garden variety knowledge, like how do you put your lawnmower together, or how you fix a flat tire, but this is insider insight, so that we may know him who is true, and we are in him who is true, in his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. So, the message for the Son in John's letters is wide-ranging because it occurs 22 times, but in terms of the message for the faithful dying, you know, if there's the threat of death, then the issue is life.

What do I do about my life? Because it's imperiled, and Son carries the assurance of eternal life, because it's the Son who gives life, and the Son who connects us with God, and in fact, as it says here, he is the true God and eternal life. The message for the lax is that saving faith, a faith in God that brings redemption to you, is not a passive assent to certain religious ideas. It's not just saying, I believe in God.

It's not compliance with a moral code. I don't know how many times I've heard people say, well, I believe in God and I try to live a good life, or I think I've kept the Ten Commandments, which nobody has, but people will say that, or I'm not as bad as most other people, something like that. That's not saving faith.

It is rejection or indifference or hostility to Jesus as a defining manifestation of God the Father. If we just assent to religious ideas, or we just comply with a moral code, or we just think we're not as bad as other people, that's rejecting Jesus. We think we're saved in this way, or it's indifference to Jesus, or even hostility to Jesus.

To enemize Jesus and his status as the King, or the Christ, or the Messiah, that's to deny God. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. To deny the Son is to deny the Father.

2:23, no one who denies the Son has the Father. And, of course, when he says he denies the Son, he's talking about Jesus in his fullness, Jesus in what he came to do, and what he did. Jesus who he is right now at the right hand of God, the Father, interceding for God's people.

Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. I remember years ago, I had an encounter with somebody who thought they had a gift of healing, and they said that they had the gift of healing people from cancer. And so this person told me their story because they were troubled, because several times over the years they had been in churches, and they had this gift of healing, and they were going to different parts of the country.

This happened to be in Scotland. And, you know, they would put their hands on somebody and pray for them, and he said that, you know, it felt really warm, and then the person would be healed from cancer. But he said after a few years in a church, he'd get kicked out, and he couldn't figure out why.

And so he had a question for me. I was a theology student, and we struck up a conversation. And so he told me this long, long story, and, you know, it sounded like church abuse to me that he had this gift and people were putting him out of the church.

But he kept saying, I want to bring people to God. I want to use my healing to bring people to God. And I said, well, you know, let's get to the bottom of this.

I said, You keep coming, bringing people to God. It makes me think of this verse. Christ, this is 1 Peter 3:18, Christ also died for sins once for all, that is, once for all time, the just, singular, the just man, for the unjust, the many, in order to bring us to God.

Having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. I quoted that verse to him, and I said, How does that relate to your bringing people to God? And his face changed, and he said, That's one part of the Bible I just don't agree with. You know, he didn't believe that people were sinners.

He didn't believe he was a sinner. He believed he had this power from God, and I mean, how can you not be right with God if you have a power from God that heals cancer? So, he did not agree with the cross of Christ at all, and he was actually very hostile when this surfaced in our conversation. We were having a period of conversation, it's just, as long as I listened to his testimony about his healing power, that he was bringing people to God.

But when God was defined in terms of the Son who died to bring us to God, it got scary, because actually he was a policeman, and it's scary when a policeman gets angry at you. So, this is God's message with relation to the Son for the lax. If you don't confess the Son, you don't have the Father, and if you don't have the light and the goodness of God, then you're going to have the darkness and the danger of darkness.

Love is the next most frequent word, and in terms of this agape word, 18 times in 1 John, 2 times in 2 John, 1 time in 3 John, here's John's message for the faithful dying. God's love is the place of refuge for the faithful. His love lifts us above fear of his judgment, as his love is perfected in us.

Anthropologists will tell us that a universal human experience is guilt, and various cultures have different ways of dealing with guilt, especially denial of guilt, but it's there. And if you read about plane crashes, I get a magazine called Flying Magazine, and there are often reports of plane crashes, and when they record flight, when they find that black box in a plane crash, and they figure out what the pilot said right before everybody died. It's amazing how many times the last words of these pilots are, Oh God, or My God.

Suddenly, men or women who may not be religious at all, when it comes to the point of dying, now all of a sudden they have this awareness of God, an awareness of possible judgment, what's going to happen when I die. But we just saw that there's an assurance of salvation through the Son, but one of the reasons there's that assurance is that knowing the Son brings us into our relationship with God, who is called love in 1st John 4. This is one of his characteristic attributes. God is love, and that love lifts us above fear of God's judgment, because that love is perfected in us.

So, we've come to know, I'm quoting 1st John 4, we've come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. Not just believe it's true, but know it and trust it. The word for believe can also be trust.

God is love, and whoever abides, there's that word, in God, there's that word, God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment. Because as he is, so also are we in this world.

As he is, so also are we in this world. There's a union with God. God is assured, God is full of love, God is full of compassion, and as he is, we are in this world.

There's no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. If we have been perfected in love, John is saying, then this lifts us out of the fear of judgment that we might otherwise have. This is significant for the faithful dying, because the faithful dying, unquestionably, I mean nobody wants to die, and people can think that bad things happening to them, that they're getting arrest, they're being searched for, their house gets burned down, they can think it's God's judgment, and oftentimes persecution is not God's judgment.

Persecution is happening for reasons we don't understand, but in the love of God, we have no fear of the judgment of God. If you read websites, or if you live in a part of the world with a lot of persecution, there are websites that you can read, like Voice

of the Martyrs, and you can often read testimonies of people who have their houses burned, or people who are arrested, or people who have been tortured, and often the testimonies are rich in a sense of love. There'll be a sense of grief and trauma, but there also often will be a sense of, I'm going on with God, I'm going on with my faith in Christ, I know he loves me, he is with me, even though this has happened to me.

John has a message for the lax. We compromise our souls, even if we profess faith in Christ, if our love is actually directed to anything other than, or more than, the Father who sent the Son. This is kind of a New Testament echo of the first commandment in the Old Testament, thou shalt have no other gods before me, or alongside of me.

John says, do not love the world, don't set your affection on the world, or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. And so, you know, this is a black-white statement.

We have to remember that the Bible says, God so loved the world, John 3:16. If God loved the world in some sense, then there is some sense in which God's people can express an affection and an affirmation of the world. But John is saying, don't set your affection on the world, and the things of the world, in such a way that they rival your affection with God, and the Son.

If anyone loves the world, then in this ultimate sense, the love of the Father is not in him. Sin is another prominent word, 17 times in John's letter, the first letter. His message for the faithful dying is that believers face death with hope, because they know the forgiveness of their sins.

God shows his love in sending his Son to satisfy God's wrath against sin. Fellowship with others in Christ provides strength in suffering. John says, 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. Later, 1 John 4:10 says, In this is love. Not that we have loved God, but that he loved us.

This is very important, because everybody who is a human being, you know, kind of normal, normal intelligence, normal life, we all know love. I mean, domestic animals know love. We love dogs, we love cats, we love kids, we love each other, you know, everybody knows love.

But this is a particular love, in this is love, not that we've loved God, but that he's loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. He paid the penalty for our sins on the cross. So, we have hope, because God in the Son has dealt with our sins.

We have forgiveness of sins. That's what propitiation means. The punishment for our sins were borne by Jesus.

There's a message for the lax here. Some commit sin knowingly, calculating that they can always get forgiveness. Jesus appeared to reduce sin in our lives, not to encourage sin by endless leniency.

1 John 3:4 and 5 says, Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness. Sin is lawlessness. And there's a lot of controversy about these verses and these words, but I will observe that the word for lawlessness here is anomia.

Namas is law, and anomia is no law. And this plausibly relates to the idea of the Torah and or the nomos in Old Testament times, and hundreds of times in the Greek Old Testament, when God's people got way out of line, especially with idolatry, it was called anomia. And there's the sin that we may commit somewhat inadvertently.

James says we all stumble in many ways. Paul says all have sinned and are falling short of the glory of God. So to be human as we are, we're going to commit sins.

But then there's sin that's anomia. There's the sin of dedicated rebellion against God. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning is practicing lawlessness.

Sin is lawlessness. You know, he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. So those who may be lax and who are dwelling in their sins and we're saying, well, you know, I believe in Jesus and I believe that his grace is endless, so even though I'm sinning characteristically, habitually, repeatedly, all I need to do is confess my sin and then he'll keep on forgiving me.

And that's a dangerous game. In English, we call it a game of chicken. When you drive toward each other on a road and you see who turns aside the first, you don't want to play chicken with God and say, well, I believe you, yeah, you tell me not to sin, but I'm going to keep on sinning because I know that I believe in you and you can't turn me away.

That kind of belief is not a real belief in God. Here's another word for no. The earlier word was ginōsko, third in frequency.

This is oida, ninth in frequency. And in terms of this knowing, here's John's message for the faithful dying. The Christian hope is the return of our Lord and Savior, and the day will come when we will see him in his glory.

And this confident expectation upholds believers in hours of testing and loss. 1 John 3:2, beloved, and don't overlook the beloveds in John's letters. Some translations go with friends, but the word beloved speaks to God's love and his claim.

It's very close to the word election. You know, God sets his affection on a people, and what links us is not that we're friends. What links us is that God has made us his friends.

He becomes our father, and we are brothers and sisters. We have a new familial identity. And John, as a leader of the Christian community, addresses the beloved.

He addresses those who know the love of God in Christ, and of course, he's one of them. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared. But we know he doesn't use the early word *ginosko*, which is more experiential, because you can't know it until it happens.

But *oida*, you can have the clear conception and conviction that when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. There's something that's going to be magic when we move from this world into the world where, because of Christ, God's glory will be visible to us without any mediation. Now we see his glory, you know, concealed.

It sort of peeks through the clouds. We see the sun. We see beauty.

We see love. We see lots of things in this world, both as normal people and as Christian people, but we don't yet see God as he really is. But we know that we will, and this is a message for the faithful dying.

You have this capacity currently to harbor a conviction that will see you through to when you are changed and you are made to be like him. A message for the lax, a sign of the presence of Christ is fervent, self-sacrificial love for others. Absence of this love means a person has not found life in Christ.

1 John 3:14, we know that we have passed out of death into life. So, here's the same kind of knowledge about what will happen when he appears. We have that same conviction, same level, same quality of conviction that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

Now that's a deeper conviction than just observing the experience. This is a conviction of the principle and the reality of the love of God that's visible, especially, I think, as you look back over time. You know, I'm well along in years now.

I can look back over decades and see the love between believers toward me and my wife, toward each other. We've been in a number of churches and a number of

places over the years, and we've seen how Christian people live over the years. They've passed out of death into life.

They love each other. Whoever does not love abides in death. They don't have that knowledge, and the lack of that knowledge means you don't know God.

A tenth, we're getting close to our twelfth word, but this is the tenth word, hearing. The verb I hear 14 times. John's message for the faithful dying is that God hears when his people cry out to him.

We have his ear. God listens to us, and he does what is best, wisest, and most loving according to his might and purpose when we pray in times of danger and need. If we're afraid of dying, that's danger.

That's what's needed. John says this is the confidence we have towards him if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. Now, God hears everything, but this is the word, or this is the truth, that God hears us, and he's going to implement what's best, wisest, and most loving according to his might and purpose.

If we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have requests that we have asked of him. Every Christian request is summarized in the Lord's Prayer under, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. No Christian should or should want to pray against God's will, so whatever it is we're praying, it's under the heading of, Lord, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Hallowed be your name. So, we have the confidence that we know if he hears us, we have what we're asking for. What we're asking for is his will.

The question in prayer is, does he hear us? Does he give us a hearing? Does it matter? Does prayer do anything? And John is, he's elevating this confidence that God hears. It doesn't mean we can snap our fingers and get him to do whatever we want to do. It does mean he takes into consideration whatever it is that we go to him with, and often he teaches us to move in his direction and teaches us to see things more in keeping with what he wants for us through prayers that he says, let's hold off on that and let's think about that for a while.

Persevering in prayer, we hear, we know he hears us. John's message for the lax is love for God and obedience to God and his commandments are interrelated. They're not antithetical.

Love for God, obedience to God. It's a mistake to lower ethical standards, supposing that a loving God is not zealous for compliance with his will for his people. Second John 6 says, this is love that we walk according to his commandments.

This is the commandment, just as you heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. We'll talk about this more later, the intertwining between faith and love and keeping commandments, but that's the message here. As you heard from the beginning, you need to live in it.

Commandment, of course, 14 times, a message for the faithful dying. Faithfulness to God's commandments can lead to abuse and arrest in many social settings, but believers are bound to believe in Christ and to love others. In this love, God is with us, and we are with God.

God gives the living assurance of His Holy Spirit. This is the commandment that we believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God and God in him, and by this we know that he abides in us by the Spirit whom he has given us.

That's a message for those who are faithful to Christ and who may pay a penalty for it. The message for the lax is that faith in Christ produces an appetite for learning and doing what he commands because God's commandments are a sign of his love. As we learn to do his will, those commandments are not burdensome.

If they're too burdensome for someone to observe, it's a sign that faith in Christ is weak or lacking. 1 John 2:4, whoever says I know him but does not keep his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him. 1 John 5:3, this is the love of God that we keep his commandments and his commandments are not burdensome.

So, it may be a little surprising that commandment occurs so frequently. Still, we'll see there's a reason for this in John's view of the Christian life and the balanced Christian life. Still, for now, we can just see that this is a sort of warning to the lax if we're indifferent towards God's commandments or we think somehow that, you know, we're big on love, we're not so big on commandments, but that's okay because God's love. He's also a God who has teaching and guidance for his people to follow. The last most frequent word is pater, father, 14 times.

In 13 times, God the Father. In 1st John, it occurs four times in 2nd John. God's message for the faithful dying or John's message for the faithful dying is the magnificence and magnitude of the Father's love by which we were made his children through Christ's sacrifice, giving steadfastness and assurance of divine protection for our souls in the end.

We also understand and expect our alienation from the world, for the world is alienated from the Father. See what kind of love the Father has given to us, John writes, that we should be called children of God, and so we are. This is a statement of amazement and astonishment that the great love of the Father should be bestowed

on us, not just in terms of benefits, but in terms of a personal union so that we become part of his family, we become his children.

The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. So that's a message for the faithful dying. It makes sense out of human antagonism towards God's people because what antagonizes some about God's people is that they have a relationship with God.

They know the love of God the Father, and this creates animosity and sometimes jealousy and impulses toward vengeance on the part of those who don't know God. His message for the lax is that the love of the Father and love from the Father is the antithesis of love for the world. If you confess the Son is Lord over the world and if you confess the Son as our saving treasure in the world, this and nothing less is to have the Father.

To love the world too much is to cut oneself off from the Father's love. And I've read these verses before, but I'll conclude this lecture with these verses. A message for the lax.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and a pride of life is not from the Father, but is from the world.

May we take these words to heart, and if we're in a dying church setting, may we find direction, assurance, and God's own presence with us through them. And if we are among the lax, then may God convict us and bring us back into the fold of trusting in him.

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