

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 33 - John's Epistles

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome back, everybody. Today we're going deep, way back into some really fascinating early Christian writings. 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John.

Oh yeah, these letters, they're like little time capsules giving us a glimpse into the lives, the struggles, all those things the first Christians had to deal with. And we're going to find this really interesting puzzle about sin in 1st John. It might leave you scratching your head a bit.

Yeah, by the end of this deep dive, we're going to try to unpack what John is really saying. It's like we're eavesdropping on a conversation from centuries ago. And these letters, it's thought they were written by the Apostle John.

But they don't actually say that. Right, they don't come right out and say it. So we're not 100% sure.

Exactly. But they offer incredible insights into the early church. These letters are often called general epistles.

What does that mean? What makes them general? Well, the term general suggests they were written for a wider audience, not just one specific church. Not just a personal letter. Right, think of it like a blog post versus a private email.

Like Paul's letters, for example, they were often laser-focused, addressing really specific problems in individual churches. But these letters, they seem meant for a broader group of Christians, maybe even a whole network of churches facing a similar challenge. Yeah, so not a global announcement, but more like a group text.

What sort of challenge were they dealing with? So picture this. Imagine a belief system that puts secret spiritual knowledge above everything else. One that downplays the physical world.

Like even our bodies. Even our bodies. This was Gnosticism.

And let me tell you, it was causing a huge stir in the early church. Yeah, that sounds like it would totally clash with the whole Christian belief in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. How was Gnosticism such a threat? Well, you're spot on.

It did clash big time. The very core of Christianity, right? It hinges on the reality of Jesus coming in the flesh, living a real human life, dying a real physical death. Yes.

And rising bodily from the dead. But Gnostics often saw the physical world as corrupted, unimportant. They were all about attaining spiritual knowledge.

And this created a massive problem for those early Christians. So Christians were focused on Jesus's life and teachings. And suddenly some people are gravitating towards this more, I don't know, like heady, spiritualized view.

Yeah, exactly. What kind of impact did that have on the early church? Oh, it was divisive. I mean, seriously divisive.

Some Christians started to doubt. Because of this Gnostic thinking? Yes. Some even left the church altogether.

You can imagine the chaos this caused. Yeah, that sounds pretty unsettling. Yeah.

And this is where 1 John comes in. You got it. In 1 John 5.18, the author states his purpose straight up: to assure believers of their eternal life.

Like a message of, "Hey, don't worry. Exactly. You are saved.

It's almost like an anchor in the storm. It is. It's as if John is saying, "Hey, don't be swayed by these Gnostic ideas.

You are saved. And here's how you can be sure. A message of stability and confidence in the midst of all this doubt.

I like it. So John gives us three tests for genuine faith. Ooh, three tests.

Okay. First, love. For each other.

For one another. But not just any love. Genuine, self-sacrificing love.

The kind of love that reflects Christ's love for us. So love is like a litmus test. That's a great way to put it.

Okay, love. What are the other two? Okay. The second test is obedience to Christ's commands.

Walk the walk, not just talk the talk. Exactly. And the third test is confessing that Jesus Christ came in the flesh.

Which is a direct challenge to the Gnostic idea that, well, the physical world doesn't really matter. Right on. So we have love, obedience, and affirming the reality of Jesus, both fully God and fully human.

Very practical. Very grounded. But there's a little bit of a head-scratcher in 1 John, isn't there? Something about sin that doesn't quite add up.

You picked up on it. This is where it gets a little tricky. Lay it on me.

All right. So in 1 John 3.6 and 9, John says, no one who abides in him keeps on sinning. No one who sins has either seen him or known him.

And no one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. Okay. So that sounds pretty straightforward, right? Yeah.

Like you're either in Christ and not sinning or, well, you're not. Right. But there's a twist.

Oh, yeah. There's definitely another side to this. A little bit earlier in 1 John 1.8 and 10, John says something that sounds completely different.

He says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Okay. And if we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

So which is it? Can Christians sin or not? How are we supposed to make sense of these seemingly opposite statements? That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? And this is where we have to dig a little deeper to really get what John is trying to tell us. I'm ready. So we're already redeemed, but not yet perfected.

What does that mean for how we understand sin as Christians? Well, it means we have to hold these two realities together, you know? On the one hand, when we put our faith in Christ, something really radical happens: we become new creations. The Bible says we die to our old sinful selves and are raised to new life in him. We're set free from sin, which no longer has dominion over us.

So it's not just about forgiveness. It's like our very nature changes. You got it.

We're given a new heart, a new spirit, a new direction. Wow. It's like getting a brand new operating system for your life.

And this is the not-yet part. We still live in a world where temptation is all around us. Right.

Our sanctification, becoming more like Christ over time, is a journey; it's ongoing. So we're no longer slaves to sin, but we still have to deal with it. Yeah.

Think of it like this. Imagine you've been rescued from enemy territory. You've been brought to this new land, a place of freedom, a place of abundance, but really, settling in, thriving in this new land.

It takes time. You might still have some old habits, old ways of thinking that you have to confront and overcome. I like that.

That's a great analogy. It's like we're caught between two worlds. Yeah.

The old and the new. Exactly. And John, he totally gets this tension.

He doesn't want his readers to think that just because they're saved, they can just keep sinning without any consequences. So he's warning against the kind of spiritual complacency. You nailed it.

But he's also warning against the other extreme. That feeling of despair when we mess up, and we feel like we can never live up to God's standards. So it's like he's trying to help us avoid these two ditches.

Right. One ditch is presuming on God's grace. Yeah.

And the other is just completely despairing of it. That's a great way to put it. He wants us to remember that sin is serious.

Yeah. And that God's grace is big enough to cover it all. This whole already but not yet idea really resonates with me.

It just feels, I don't know, authentic to the Christian experience. Totally. It's that tension between who we are in Christ and who we're still becoming.

We're new creations, but we're still a work in progress, you know? Yeah. So how does this understanding the already but not yet, how does it affect how we actually live as Christians? It changes everything. First, it reminds us that sin is a big deal.

It grieves God. It hurts us. Right.

It hurts others. You can't just excuse it away. Nope.

We can't just say, well, nobody's perfect and move on. We've got to be on guard. We've got to resist temptation and confess our sins when we fall short.

Right. But we also don't need to just totally beat ourselves up when we do mess up. That's right.

And that's the beauty of this: already-but-not-yet. We don't have to try to be perfect on our own because Jesus, He's already made us perfect in Him. So we can approach this whole struggle with sin, with humility, but also with hope.

Absolutely. Humility because, well, we need God's grace. And hope because, well, His grace is enough.

That is encouraging. Yeah. And, you know, John doesn't just drop this mind-blowing paradox about sin on us.

He goes on to talk about some really practical stuff in his two shorter letters, 2 and 3 John. Yes, he does. These letters, they may be short, but they're packed with insights into the early church.

Yeah. And the challenges they faced- challenges that are still relevant to us today. Let's start with 2 John.

What's the big takeaway there? 2 John is like a warning siren. You know, it's warning against false teachers in the church. Those Gnostics we talked about? Yeah.

It seems like some of them were trying to sneak into the church and spread their messed-up teachings. So John's saying, be careful who you trust. Yes.

Not everyone who says they're a Christian is actually teaching the truth. He urges the church to be wise, to test everything, to hold on to sound doctrine, and to reject anyone who's twisting the truth about Christ. Now, there's that part in 2 John where he talks about not welcoming false teachers into your home.

What did he mean by that? That's a good question. And this is where understanding the historical context really helps. Okay.

Back then, a lot of churches met in homes. Oh, right. So John isn't literally saying, slam the door in anyone's face who disagrees with you about theology.

So the house is a metaphor for the church. Exactly. He's talking about protecting the church from false teaching.

Makes sense. It's about keeping the gospel pure and the church unified. Okay.

That clarifies things. So what about 3 John? What's the focus there? Okay. So 3 John tackles a different problem.

It's about this guy, Diotrephes. Oh, yeah. Diotrephes.

And he was causing all sorts of trouble in the church. The original church drama king. I know, right? It seems like he was power-hungry, a gossip.

Oh, no. And refused to recognize the church leaders. Wow.

John calls him out and urges the church to stand up to people like him. So it's a call to stand up for the truth. Yes.

For unity. Yes. And for godly leadership in the church.

Absolutely. These short letters, they give us a peek into the real struggles of the early church. And these struggles, they're still around today.

It's amazing how these letters from so long ago still speak to us. As we're wrapping up this deep dive into 1, 2, and 3 John, there's a question I want to leave our listeners with. So much good stuff in these letters.

Yeah. We've talked about Gnosticism already, but not this idea yet. Yeah.

But before we go, I want to go back to something in 1 John that really got me thinking. That bold statement that those who are in Christ, they don't sin. What do you think John is really saying there? Yeah.

It's a statement that has... Well, it's left a lot of people scratching their heads over the years. Right. But if we really look closely at the context and remember this already but not yet thing we talked about.

Yeah. I think we can start to see what John is getting at. Okay.

Help me out here. So John isn't laying down some impossible rule. He's pointing to this huge change that happens deep down inside a believer when we're united with Christ.

Right. It's not just forgiveness. It's like our whole nature is transformed.

Yeah. We talked about that new operating system. Right.

So how does that change how we think about sin? Yeah. How does it... Well, it means that sin isn't in control anymore. Before we knew Christ, we were slaves to sin, right? It was like our automatic setting.

The default. Yes. But when we come to Christ, we get this new heart, this new spirit.

We're empowered by the Holy Spirit to resist temptation, to live a life that makes God happy. So it's not about never messing up. Right.

It's more about our desires and motivations changing. Exactly. Our deepest desire now is to please God, to follow Him.

We'll probably still stumble. Yeah. But sin, it's not who we are anymore.

I see. It's like before we knew Christ, our compass was always pointing towards sin. Yeah.

But now, because of His grace, our compass is reset to point towards Him. We might still get off track sometimes. Sure.

But our overall direction is different. That's a great way to think about it. And this is why John can say, you know, those who abide in Christ don't sin.

He's not saying we won't ever struggle. He's talking about that radical change that Christ brings into our lives. It's not about pretending we're perfect.

It's about living in this new identity we have in Christ. Yes. And this truth, it should challenge us and encourage us.

It challenges us to take sin seriously. Yeah. To fight temptation, to really pursue holiness.

Right. But it also encourages us because we know we're not in this alone. We have the Holy Spirit with us, giving us the power to live like Christ.

Such a good reminder. We're not saved by being perfect. We're saved by God's grace.

And that grace, it transforms us. It does, from the inside out. And that transformation, that journey of becoming more like Christ.

Sanctification. Yes. It's a lifelong thing.

It's messy. It is. It's hard.

Yeah. But it's also beautiful. It really is.

Well, as we wrap up this deep dive into 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, I hope you've gained some fresh insights from these ancient letters. They're full of wisdom. They're full of encouragement.

They're so relevant for us today, even though they were written so long ago. They really are. They remind us that the Christian life is about growth.

It's about change. It's about going deeper with God. Yes.

And they point us back to Jesus, who is our hope, our anchor. He is. Well, thanks for joining us on this deep dive.

Keep wrestling with these ideas. Keep exploring these amazing letters and keep seeking Jesus. Amen to that.

We'll see you next time.