

1 John 2

by Daniel Steele

The Epistle of 1 John emphasizes the importance of living a sinless Christian life, and the role of the Advocate, Jesus Christ, in helping believers to overcome sin and to live a life of obedience and love.

Scripture: 1 John 2:1-2, 1 John 2:5, 1 John 2:15, 1 John 2:29 - 3:1, 1 John 3:9, 1 John 3:24

Topics: "Victory Over Sin", "Christian Living"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the prevention and cure of sin as outlined in the First Epistle of John, emphasizing that sin is not a necessity for believers and that victory over temptation is possible through the grace of Jesus. John aims for complete victory over sin, not regarding it as a normal element of the Christian life. He highlights the importance of keeping God's commandments, the role of Jesus as our Advocate with the Father, and the need to abide in Him to avoid the allure of the world and its ways. Steele delves into the significance of love, righteousness, and the evidence of sonship through deeds of righteousness before God, ultimately pointing to the eternal life found in abiding in the Son and the Father.

Transcript

HALF-HOURS WITH JOHN'S EPISTLES

FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

CHAPTER II.

THUS far John has treated sin as a reality, and has exposed the fallacies by which its repugnance to the character of God is concealed, and its significance is vainly done away by a false philosophy. He now proceeds to show that the purpose of this Epistle is the prevention and the cure of sin.

1. "That ye may not sin." This implies that sin is not a necessity, that under the dispensation of grace the believer may be always victorious over temptation. We know that he is addressing those who profess to be Christians by the endearing style of address, "My little children" and also by the fact that God is spoken of as Father, which is in the New Testament a relationship purely spiritual and belonging only to those who have been born of the Spirit. It is as evident as the cloudless midday sun that John does not regard sin as a normal element of the Christian life. In aiming to produce complete and constant victory over sin he was not endeavoring to set forth an abnormal character. An un-sinning Christian was in his estimation neither an impossibility nor an anomaly. John was not visionary but sober in his endeavor to edify and purify the

church. He plainly asserts that sinlessness is the aim of his teaching, and that this is not gained by efforts on the plane of natural ability, but by the grace of our Lord Jesus who sends the Paraclete to "cleanse from all unrighteousness." We call attention to the aorist tense, "may not sin," that ye may not commit a single sin. Says Bishop Westcott, "The thought is of the single act, not of the state (present tense). The tense is decisive against the idea that the apostle is simply warning his disciples not to draw encouragement for license from the doctrine of forgiveness. His aim is to produce the completeness of the Christ-like life. (Verse 6.)" Says Alford, "That ye may not sin (at all) implies the absence not only of the habit, but of any single acts of sin. The aorist tense alone refutes the supposition that John is exhorting the unconverted."

"And if any man sin." Here again the tense indicates a single act into which the regenerate person may be suddenly carried against the real purpose and tenor of his life (i. 7), in contrast with a career or habitual state of sin. The possibility of a sinless Christian life is still implied. We call attention to the peculiar form of the protasis or conditional part of this sentence as contrasted with the apodosis or conclusion. It begins with the third person singular intimating the rarity of a sin in a company of normal believers, and also the fact that John shrank from saying "if we sin," thus seemingly identifying himself with sin. But he changes to the first person plural in the conclusion, "we have a Paraclete," because sinless believers need the constant intercessions of Jesus Christ to keep them victorious over every temptation, and to plead their cause against their accuser, the devil. The form of the sentence implies that the writer was not conscious of any single sin, much less of a state of sin; also it indicates that he and his saintly brethren had constant resort to the Paraclete above for effectual spiritual help.

"We have an Advocate." Greek, Paraclete. This is the only text in which this term is applied to Christ, although it is implied in John xiv. 16, "he shall give you another Paraclete." The most common meaning in classic Greek is advocate. Jesus pleads our cause with the Father, and the Holy Spirit pleads the Father's cause with us. The priestly office of the Advocate was typified by the entrance of the high priest into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. (Heb. vii. 25, ix. 11-24.) Augustine thus sets forth the legal aspect of the Advocate with the Father, "If a man sometimes in this life commits himself to an eloquent tongue and does not perish, will you perish if you commit yourself to the Logos, the Word?"

"With the Father." Greek "pros, face to face with" Him, addressing Him with continued pleadings in that divine nature which still retains the humanity taken to itself on the earth. This is expressed by His name "Jesus Christ" combining His manhood and divinity as Saviour and King.

"The righteous." That quality needful to give the strongest efficacy to His advocacy of the weak and the erring, whom He wishes to save, not by setting aside the righteous law, but by magnifying it in His own human character and in His atoning death voluntarily endured for all in fellowship with Him through an obedient faith. This exaltation of the divine righteousness is a peculiarity of John. See i. 9, 1 29, iii. 7; compare, Rom. iii. 26. Bishop Westcott thinks that the manner of Christ's pleading "is a subject wholly beyond our present powers." It is certain that in His so-called high priestly prayer for His disciples in John xvii. are revealed the essence of His present plea, its spirit and arguments.

2. "He is the propitiation." The Greek pronoun "Himself" magnifies the efficacy of both His atonement and His intercession. Note the present tense, as denoting the propitiation as eternally existing, and not as past. See Rev. iv. 6, where Christ in heaven is the Lamb newly slain. His garments still retain their bloody hue. He is not called our propitiator, but our propitiation, to emphasize the fact that He does not use means outside of Himself, but is in His own person the propitiatory offering as well as the high priest. The Greek

word for propitiation in the New Testament occurs only here and in the parallel text iv. 10. It is found more frequently in the Old Testament.

"For our sins." The atonement is efficacious unto eternal salvation, in the case of responsible moral agents, only on the condition of persevering faith.

"But also for the whole world." The atonement is objectively for all alike, extending as far as the need of it extends in time and place. The only limitation to its saving power is in human free agency. Hence the propitiation is in its subjective efficacy limited to those who accept it as their only plea. Hence John says it is not only for us who have appropriated it by faith, but also for all the sinners in the world on the same terms. The omission of the word "sins" before "of the whole world" has its parallel in Heb. vii. 27. It has not the least doctrinal significance, as some assert who teach that the atonement is limited to those who are unconditionally elected to eternal life.

3. "In this we perceive that we know Him." Every believer may know that he is saved, first, intuitively by the unction of the Holy Spirit, as in 120, 27, and secondly, inferentially from our consciousness of obedience. "If we are (continually) keeping His commandments." The words "In this" sometimes refer to what has been just said; sometimes, as in this case, these words point forward to the next utterance. Knowledge of God involves personal sympathy and aspiration after a perfect conformity to His moral character. "To know God as God is to be in vital fellowship with Him, to love Him, to fulfil that relation toward Him for which we are born." (Westcott.) Whether the object of knowledge expressed by the pronoun "Him" is the Son of God or the Father is unknown. It is no mean argument in proof of the Divinity of Jesus Christ that an inspired apostle should confound his personality with that of the Father. It is quite evident that in John's conception Jesus Christ is the God-man, the revelation of God to men and possibly to all moral intelligences. As a general usage of John's epistles, "that one" refers to the Son of God, and "He himself" to the Father. It is in the Son that the Father is known. (John xiv. 9.)

"If we keep His commandments." The scrupulous observance of definite instructions, a cheerful service not of the letter but of the spirit, prompted not by fear of the law, but by love to the lawgiver. A frequent perusal of this Epistle is an effectual preventive of antinomian tendencies.

4. "He that saith." An individualizing statement of the contents of the comprehensive form before used, "If we say" (i. 9, 8, 10), and (Greek) used again in verse 5. These two forms, with two others, "if any one says" and "whosoever says," are interchangeable

"A liar." To be a liar is worse than to lie. The noun denotes a more permanent state of depravity than the verb. The statement is strengthened by adding "the truth is not in him." The whole character is manifestly false.

The Gnostic error here antagonized by John is this, that an intellectual knowledge of God, a philosophical theism, without obedience, is all that is required of Christians. Light can never be a substitute for love, even if it could exist independent of love.

5. "Whosoever keepeth his word." The Word of God is kept where it is not only remembered, but continually obeyed. This constancy is expressed here by the present tense. Here, as in i. 7, the importance of the possession of true godliness is urged as opposed to the mere semblance and profession of it. The whole revelation of God in Christ must be scrupulously regarded. The Word of God answers to the spirit and not to the letter, and thus binds up into unity His many commandments. For the

full meaning of these words study John xiv. 21-24.

"The love of God is perfected." We are not sure of the meaning of this equivocal phrase, "the love of God," whether it is His love to us or our love toward Him. But when perfection is predicated of the love of God it seems to imply that it relates to our love toward God, since our love is capable of imperfection, while His is always perfect, and it seems to be a truism to assert its perfection, and a paradox to say that it is "perfected." It is true that our love is enkindled by His love as a spark dropped from the skies. God is said to give His love to us when by His Spirit He announces our adoption. (Gal. iv. 6.) Then love responsive to that of our great Benefactor springs up in our hearts as the first throb of spiritual life. In a sense it is God's love throbbing in our bosoms, because it is originated, or rather occasioned, by Him. But in an important sense it is human, because it is the activity of our spiritual susceptibilities unfolding according to the laws of mind, as gratitude toward a benefactor.

"In itself it is not a startling or revolting thought, that the love of God should dwell in us in its full measure and in its simple perfection." (Haupt) St. Paul teaches the doctrine of Christian perfection in various terms, such as 2 Cor. vii. 1, "perfecting holiness;" xiii. 8, "be perfect;" Rom. xiii. 10, "love is the fulfilling of the law;" Eph. iii. 19, "that ye may be filled with all the fullness of God;" iv. 13, "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;" Heb. vii. 25, "he is able to save unto the uttermost;" Heb. xiii. 20, 21, "Now the God of peace . . . make you perfect." See notes on 1 John iv. 12, 17, 18. In the Apostolic Fathers we find the following: "Those who in love were perfected" (aorist), Clemens Romanus 1 Cor. 50; and Doctrine of the Apostles, x. 5, "Remember, O Lord, thy church to perfect it in the love of Thee." It is a state of "absolute readiness to learn and to do God's Will" (Westcott.) It is entered through heart-circumcision. "And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live." (Deut. xxx. 6.) "The real and eternal life." (1 Tim. vi. 12, 19.) Perfect love is completed holiness which dwells in the sphere of love. (Eph. i. 4, iii. 17, 19; 1 Them iii. 12, 13; 1 Tim. i. 5.)

"Hereby we know." Obedience is the infallible sign of the union of believers with God. 'By this we know' occurs very often in this Epistle (verse 3, ii. 3, iii. 16, 19, 24, iv. 2, 6, 13, v. 2), reminding us of the test tubes of a chemist used to ascertain the nature of the substances in his crucible. With so many easily applied practical tests it would be impossible for an earnest and honest person to misjudge his own character and to infer that he is a child of God when he is disobeying His commandments.

"We are in Him." A favorite expression in John's writings, denoting the union of the believer with God or with Christ, derived from Christ's metaphor of the vine and the branches. (John xv. 1-10.) More frequently it is "abiding in God," which expresses the personal determination and effort of trust See verses 24, 27, 28, iii. 6, 24, iv. 12, 13, 15, 16. Beware of the theory of the incorporation of the believer in the body of the glorified Jesus at his first act of saving faith to be forever afterward viewed by God as absolutely sinless and perfect in his standing in Christ, though in his state he is wallowing in the mire of the foulest sins. This imputed personal righteousness is antinomianism, which John Wesley defines as "the substitution of faith for holiness." Bengel calls attention to the near, nearer, nearest relation expressed in the progressive phrases in this section, "to know him," "to be in him," "to abide in him," "cognition," "communion," and "constancy."

6. "Ought." This expresses a special, personal obligation "to walk" after the pattern of Him who stands out as the one model seen in the faultless perfection of His humanity. This walk is in a narrow path, through obloquy, reproach, abandonment by opposing friends and unbelieving kindred, loss of reputation -- "He

made himself of no reputation" -- humiliation, sacrifice, suffering, poverty, betrayal and crucifixion. We must count the cost and be prepared to be baptized with a baptism of manifold woes. While His feet were nailed to the cross they were walking in the way of love. This is the type of the Christian's life. There is no other road to heaven.

7. "Beloved." While enforcing the commandment to love, St. John gives expression to love by this endearing epithet.

"From the beginning." He probably means from the commencement of the Christian faith of the readers. "The new commandment" of love is ever new, because it has new sanctions daily with our increasing knowledge of Christ. It was new when the disciples saw Him on the cross and heard Him pray, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It was new when they saw Him after His resurrection, and again after the cloud received Him out of their sight. It had an especial newness when the Paraclete on the day of pentecost came into their hearts, flooding them with love. As we have an ever-increasing ability to apprehend with fresh power the beauty of Christ's character, so the command to love Him and all who bear His image will be new. "While life advances and our spiritual life unfolds the Gospel must be always new." Hence there is no irksomeness, no theadbareness in real, hearty Christian service. To stationary Christians this commandment is always old, but to advancing believers, who have through the inner revelation of Christ by the Holy Spirit, more and more perfect vision of Him, love is more and more abundantly shed abroad in their hearts.

8. "Which is true in him and in you." Doubly true as well as new. First, is always a more attractive object; and, second, the normal, progressive disciples have always enlarged capacity for loving the adorable Christ and all who bear His image. "The fact that the commandment is new as well as old is proved true in Christ, so far as His words and works have become more fully known; and 'in you,' so far as the actual experience of life has shown this duty of love in a new light, more comprehensive and constraining." (Westcott.)

"Because the darkness is past." Rather is passing away, is on the wane and the true light is showing its increasing splendor; therefore you are under a stronger obligation to walk in the light by fellowship with God, obedience to His Son, imitation of Christ's example and a progressive love of the brethren. Light symbolizes intelligence and holiness.

"The true light." As opposed to the spurious phosphorescence of Gnostic philosophy and the dim and unsteady light of the Old Testament.

9. "In the light, and hateth." An impossible combination. Saving knowledge is always sympathetic and involves love to God and man. It is a very common mistake to put intellectual knowledge for a spiritual knowledge of Christ. It is easy to substitute an orthodox head for a regenerate heart. It is the business of the faithful pastor to show the disastrous consequences and to secure a genuine transformation. "Where sympathy exists hatred is impossible" (John vii. 7); "where sympathy does not exist hatred is inevitable" (John xv. 18-20). (Bishop Westcott.) Yet hatred of iniquity is a moral duty. The English language is unfortunate in having the verb "hate" signify abhorrence of evil and antipathy to a fellow Christian. The latter is the meaning of John.

"His brother." This is the New Testament idea of brotherhood. (Acts iii. 17, vi. 3, ix. 30; Rom. i. 13.) The title thus limited is used throughout the Epistles. Says Westcott, "There is, as far as it appears, no case where a fellow-man, as man, is called a brother in the Now Testament." We are, according to Augustine,

"So to love our enemies as to make them friends; for Christ so loved, who, while hanging on the cross, said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' "

"In darkness even until now." He is not merely false in profession, but is in a state of sin, or darkness the exact opposite to his profession, a spiritual darkness to which there is no sunrise.

10. "Abideth in the light." He not only is in the light, but he also permanently dwells in this delightful element.

"None occasion of stumbling." Through coldness toward a fellow Christian a man may not only be a stumbling block to others, but he may also, as we infer from verse 11, make his own path dark and difficult, for "he knoweth not whither he goes," having lost his assurance which requires love as well as light. Hence "his whole life is a continual error." (Howe.) The darkness of a lack of love, like physical darkness, destroys the organ of spiritual vision. See Is. vi. 10; 2 Cor. iv. 4. The English "blinded," in the sense of blindfolded, is not the exact meaning of the Greek "to make blind," or to produce a state of blindness.

b. ii. 12-28. What Walking in the Light excludes: the Things and Persons to be avoided.

Three-fold Statement of Reasons for Writing (ii. 12-14).

Things to be avoided: the World and Its Ways (ii. 15-17).

Persons to be avoided: Antichrists (B. 18-26).

[Transitional.] The Place of Safety: Christ (ii. 27, 28).

12. "Little children." This is a title of endearment addressed to all St. John's readers, and not to children in age.

"Your sins are forgiven." The Greek perfect tense implies not repeated forgiveness up to the present hour, but rather the unbroken continuance of a conscious freedom from guilt as the result of pardon.

"His name's sake." The antecedent to "His" is Christ, the thought of whom has been present in the mind of John since the last mention of His name in verse 2, and the last reference to Him in verse 6. His name implies all that is contained in His personality, His sinless example, atoning death, glorious resurrection and mediatorial intercession at the right hand of the Father. They who believe in His name not only assent to Christian truths, but also wholly cast themselves upon His atoning merit for the assured possession of eternal life. The declaration of the purpose of the Gospel in John xx. 31 is, "that believing ye may have life through His name." This corresponds very closely with the purpose of this Epistle, "that ye also may have fellowship with us," i. e., divine fellowship implies divine life.

13. "Fathers." Persons eminent in the church and clothed with responsible authority. This title implies maturity of Christian life. It is applied in the Old Testament to prophets (2 Kings 112, vi. 21), priests (Jud. xvii. 10), teachers (Prov. i. 8), and in the Roman Catholic Church to the whole body of pastors. "The whole course of history is, where rightly understood, the manifestation of one will. To know this in Christ is the prerogative of a 'father,' and the knowledge is the opportunity for the completest life." (Bishop Westcott.)

"From the beginning." Him that is from the beginning, the Logos or Word who was (not was created) in the beginning (John i. 1-14); this is from eternity and within time-limits became flesh, by assuming human

nature, soul and body.

"Young men." Believers, in the full vigor of their physical and mental powers.

"Have overcome." Not a momentary triumph, but a permanent victory, remaining effective to the present moment, like that of Christ, "I have overcome the world." (John xvi. 33.) Such a victory is the heritage of every perfect and persevering believer.

"The evil one." A personal adversary in the spiritual realm with whom the Christian must have an inevitable conflict, ending in victory, or a shameful defeat through culpable cowardice. In John's writings he is called "the serpent," "the ancient serpent," "the dragon," who is called "the devil and Satan," "the accuser," and the "ruler of this world," whom Paul calls "the (usurping) god of this world." Of his origin we know very little, but enough to know that he was once upright, but voluntarily fell into sin. (John viii. 44.) This excludes dualism, the notion of two co-eternal beings or principles, good and evil, the one inhering in spirit and the other in matter.

14. At the close of verse 13, John seems to have laid down his pen for a season. On resuming it again he reads the last verse written in the present tense and proceeds to repeat his address in the use of the past tense, as if explaining his former advice to the same three classes.

"Because ye know him." This knowledge implies the new birth, establishing a direct spiritual connection through the agency of both the Son of God and the Holy Spirit. For "no man knoweth the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him." The fatherhood of God is a spiritual relation made known only by a supernatural revelation, through the Holy Spirit, by whom the new birth is accomplished, and by whom, as the Spirit of adoption, crying in our hearts, "Abba, Father," it is revealed. St. John says much about the knowledge of God as the privilege of the believer. The phrase "ye have known" occurs three times in these two verses; "ye, know" occurs eight times, and "we know" is found seventeen times in this Epistle. He teaches a knowable salvation more emphatically than John Wesley. There is involved in the knowledge of the Father, sympathy, love and submission. It dwells not so much in the sphere of the intellect as in that of the heart.

"Have overcome." The perfect tense implies past triumph continuing to the present time. The true Christian is always young. He has the habit of victory, like Napoleon and Grant. Each successive victory makes him stronger for the next conflict. What could stand before a church composed of such members? To conserve this all-conquering strength John now proceeds to warn believers against the enervating effects of worldliness.

15. "Love not the world." The sum of secular influences hostile to God, "the world is the order of finite being regarded as apart from God. Whatever is treated as complete without reference to God is so far a rival to God" (Westcott), instead of being the true expression of God's will under the conditions of its creation. Some exegetes harmonize this prohibition, "love not the world," with the statement, "God so loved the world" (John iii. 16), by saying, "That which man may not do, being what he is, God can do, because He looks through the surface of things by which man is misled to the very being which He created." A better harmony of these Scriptures is found in the fact that love has two meanings : (1) a love of pity, and (2) a love of complacency and delight. In the first meaning we not only may love the world, but we ought to love the world, if we are in sympathy with God, and we are under obligation to evince our pitying love by godlike self-sacrifice for the salvation of the fallen world. The more Christ-like we are the more perfectly will we fulfil this obligation. But this material world, as an object of delight in preference to

its Creator, we may not love. Augustine finely illustrates this point: "If the bridegroom should make for his bride a ring and give it to her, and if she should love the ring more than her husband who made it for her, would not an adulterous disposition be detected by means of this very gift of her bridegroom, although she was loving what he gave to her?"

"The love of the Father is not in him." One heart cannot contain two loves so hostile to each other as the love of light and the love of darkness. John assumes that there can be no vacuum in the soul. Says Augustine to the young convert, "Thou art a vessel, but hitherto thou hast been full. Pour out what thou hast that thou mayest receive what thou hast not. Exclude the evil love of the world, that thou mayest be filled with the love of God." All other loves must be secondary, must be in harmony with love to God, and must be referred to Him. But supreme love to the finite is antagonistic to love of the infinite One, because the sense of personal relationship to Him is lost. The exact order of the Greek is remarkably suggestive: "There exists not (whatever he may say) the love of the Father in him." Says Philo, as quoted by John of Damascus, "It is as impossible for love toward the world to co-exist with love toward God as it is impossible for light and darkness to dwell with each other." The philosophy of this negation is given in the next verse.

16. "Because everything in the world . . . is passing away."

The stream never rises higher than the fountain. Supreme love to the world being limited by the perishing world is incompatible with love toward the eternal Father. This incongruity relates not only to the inequality in the duration of the two objects of love, but also to their characters. Supreme love to a finite object is a degrading idolatry; supreme love to God is a most elevating and transforming virtue. Hence the prohibition of love toward the world is prompted by a benevolent desire in the heart of God to avert from us an unspeakable evil and to bestow that happiness which shall be as lasting as His own eternal existence.

"The lust of the flesh." The flesh is the subject in which the desire dwells. It seeks to appropriate that which is like itself, material rather than spiritual. It is not sin, but has a natural leaning toward sin in fallen humanity. But all unlawful pleasures are sinful and lawful gratifications of sense may become sinful by being excessive, as gluttony. St. John rarely uses the term "flesh" in the same way that St. Paul generally does, to denote that portion of man's nature which has an hereditary proclivity toward sin. The removal of it by entire sanctification is called "the crucifixion of the flesh." Rarely, if ever, is "the body" thus used. The phrase "vile 'body" is an erroneous translation of "the body of our humiliation." (Phil. iii. 21, R. V.) The body is not to be crucified or flagellated, but sanctified by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, otherwise it will be polluted and degraded by the tyranny of the flesh.

"The lust of the eyes." The eye is the inlet of much innocent pleasure. But this pleasure becomes idle and prurient curiosity, when it craves unlawful sights, inflaming pictures, nude statuary, polluting scenic displays, the foul exhibitions of the circus, the cruel and savage exhibitions of the ancient amphitheatre and the murderous excitements of the modern prize fight. The college regattas, baseball matches and deadly football contests make their appeals, through the eyes of myriads of spectators, to the bestial rather than the angelic in human nature. The public competitions of modern athleticism have degenerated into what Augustine aptly styles, "sacraments of the devil." The lust of the eyes also includes the leprous novel, in which scenes of debauchery are spread out before the imagination, the eye of the mind. The lust of the flesh seeks to appropriate the object of its desire, while the lust of the eyes is satisfied by enjoyment under the form of contemplation. The first is physical, the second is mental. Both are hostile to true spirituality, which lives only in the atmosphere of holiness.

"The vainglory of life." Priding one's self on a false view of what things are in themselves, empty, unstable and unsatisfying. The Greek word for "life" frequently signifies, as it does here, "the means of life." (Mark xii. 44; Luke viii. 43, xv. 12, 30; 1 John iii. 17.)

"Is of the world." This is the derivation of the perversities just named. From it they take their moral character; they inherit the destiny of the world, the fashion of which "is passing away." "Not only is the love of the world irreconcilable with the love of the Father, but also yet further, the fate of the world is included in its essential character." (Westcott.) The world is a screen which hides from unbelievers the presence of God. They have eyes to see not spiritual realities, but their perishable material semblances.

17. "And the lust thereof." The desire for the world is as unsubstantial as the world itself, which awakened it. But the desire will remain forever an aching void in the spirit bereft of its idol by death.

"But he that doeth . . . abideth." Doing God's will is the strongest proof of supreme love. The contrast of a world loved as an idol is not God, as we might expect, but the obedient believer brought into vital sympathy with Him, so that he partakes of His eternal blessedness as a kinsman of His eternal Son. (Mark iii. 35.)

18. "It is the last hour." This expression denotes a crisis and not the end of the world. Christianity is the last dispensation in human history. It will be a period of suffering and conflict ending in victory over all the foes of Christ. Of these the most subtle and the most difficult to conquer is that evil power which antagonizes Christ by proposing to take His name and to continue His work while denying Him. This hypocrisy on the part of men professing faith in Christ is personified under the name of antichrist, a word meaning far more than an adversary of Christ. Says Bishop Westcott, "The essential character of antichrist lies in the denial of the true humanity of Messiah, as in verse 22, in iv. 3, and 2 John 7." To refute the Gnostic denial of the reality of Christ's body is the purpose of this Epistle. If He is not the God-man, very God and very man, there is an impassable gulf between God and the world. It is not bridged by the incarnate Son, if He is not a real man. If His body was a phantom, His incarnation, atoning death and resurrection are unreal. God is still unknown and unknowable, and all men are, and ever must be, agnostics groaning under the burden of unforgiven sins.

"Even now . . . many antichrists" have arisen in foreshadowings of one great future antichrist.

19. "They were not of us." This means that these false teachers were not in sympathy with the church at the time of their withdrawal. It does not signify that they were never genuine Christians. The fact that there are withered and fruitless branches now in the true vine (John xv. 2) does not prove that those branches were never alive, but, rather, it proves their former life. It is a case of manifest apostasy, beginning in the spirit and ending in the flesh. They remained awhile in the church after the extinction of their spiritual life, "as evil humors in the body of Christ." (Augustine.) The clear revelation of their changed character was a divine safeguard against further harm; for by going out they neutralized their future bad influence within the church.

20. "But ye have an unction." The word "ye" is emphatic. The outward symbol of the Old Testament, the sacred oil compounded, as in Ex. xxx. 22-25, is here used to signify the gift of the Spirit, the characteristic endowment of every believer who aspires to his full heritage in Christ, "the Holy One." Jesus was called in the Hebrew Messiah, anointed, and in the Greek, Christos, because he received the chrisma, or unction of the Holy Spirit, inducting Him into His three-fold office of prophet, priest and king. (1 Kings xix. 16; Ex. xl. 15; 1 Sam. ix. 16.) This chrism is used by John in contrast to the antichrists, who, because they had either

not received or had lost the sanctifying and illuminating chrism, were in revolt against their Teacher, Saviour and Lord. The Holy Spirit is the conservator of orthodoxy and of loyalty to Christ. Since Christ sends the Paraclete it seems to be more natural to refer "the Holy One" to the Second Person of the Trinity.

"Ye know all things." The text of Westcott and Hort is, "Ye all know," i. e., the truth. Hence no false teaching respecting fundamentals can deceive you, so long as ye dwell under the anointing by the exercise of a persevering faith in the incarnate Son of God. The anointing with oil as a part of the ceremony of baptism is a human invention having no scriptural authority.

21. "No lie is of the truth." This truism is John's way of expressing the eternal distinction between truth and falsehood. He had no notion that he could be of use to believers in Christ unless there was in them a capacity of distinguishing truth from a lie and of recognizing intuitively and feeling instinctively the everlasting opposition of one to the other. The most hopeless case is that of a person who has lost this capacity, who enjoys the rainbow hues of error and regards it as truth, and despises the granitic reality of truth and treats it as fiction.

"And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." (2 Thess. ii. 11) 12.)

22. "Who is the liar?" This is the exact original. The word "lie" suggests to John the biggest liar in the universe who sums up in his own person all that is false. "The denial of the fact 'Jesus is the Christ,' when grasped in its full significance -- intellectual, moral, spiritual -- includes all falsehood; it reduces all knowledge of necessity to a knowledge of phenomena; it takes away the highest ideal of sacrifice; it destroys the connection of God and man." (Westcott.) There are no liars if he who denies that Jesus is the Christ is not one. This is parallel to Abraham Lincoln's terse expression, "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." "These Gnostic teachers, who profess to be in the possession of the higher truth, are really possessed by one of the worst of lies." (The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges.)

"Denieth the Father." This follows the denial of the Son, who is the only personal revelation of the Father. The Supreme Divinity of Christ is our only safeguard against polytheism on the one hand and pantheism on the other. Our knowledge of the unity, the personality and the moral perfections of God is revealed in Jesus Christ, and in Him only.

23. "Hath the Father also." The sentence of which these words are a part for no good reason is in italics in the A. V. There is no doubt of the genuineness of the original. It is correctly printed in the R. V. The confession of the Son is more than an intellectual act; it is the surrender of the will and the reliance of the heart on Him alone for salvation. To such a person says he, "My Father will love him, and we will come unto him and make our abode with him."

24. "Let that abide in you." The emphatic word is "you." "As for you" in contrast with the Gnostic errorists spoken of in verse 22. The strength of the Christian is not in his good resolutions, but in the Holy Spirit, the author of life abiding within the believer. In iv. 15 this strength is still more emphatically expressed in the mutual indwelling -- a double mystery, "God in us, we in God." We let the Spirit abide when we with a right attitude of the will exercise an appropriating faith in His promises. "Looking unto Jesus" is the conquering attitude of the soul. In modern phrase the exhortation of John is this, "Hold fast the Gospel which ye first heard, and reject the innovations of these false teachers." From the beginning Christianity is perfect and incapable of improvement.

"Ye also." Divine life is the source of divine fellowship.

"Shall abide in the Son and in the Father." Through faith in the Son we mount up to the knowledge of the Father. How my spirit can interpenetrate and abide in the personality of the Son and that of the Father is a mystery next to the mystery of Three Persons in one Divine nature. But the heart can feel what the intellect cannot comprehend.

25. "Eternal life" is only another view of abiding in the Son and in the Father. It is the heart knowledge of God. "And this is life eternal, that they should know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent." It was the mission of Christ to offer spiritual life and lead men to seek it through faith in Himself.

26. An experimental knowledge of Christ is the best safeguard against the Gnostics, "them that would lead you astray." This knowledge no human instruction can teach. The Holy Spirit, here called "the anointing," imparts life to the penitent believer and the power of spiritual perception. These fundamental facts are revealed only by the Holy Spirit -- regeneration, forgiveness, adoption and entire sanctification. In minor particulars teachers are helpful, but in respect to these fundamentals and experimentals "Christians needed not fresh teaching, even from apostles, still less from those who professed to guide them into new 'depths'" (Westcott), who made spiritual excellence to consist, not in a holy life, but in knowledge of an esoteric kind open only to the initiated, who boasted that they "knew the depths" and could say, "this is profound." Says Augustine, "He who teaches hearts has His chair in heaven."

28. At this point John turns from the ideal to the practical view of Christian truth and duty, the sum of which is "abide in Him," and give proof of it by your conduct.

"When He shall appear." Better, "if He shall be manifested." The "if" implies doubt as to the time, not as to the future facts of Christ's final coming to the general judgment.

"We may have boldness." A word which in the Greek always implies unreserved utterance or freedom of speech. No word could be found in that language which so strongly expresses deliverance, not only from guilty fear, but also from speechless awe.

"Not be ashamed before Him." Not shrink back with shame or dread from His presence as the judge of all men. It is the privilege of every Christian to live on the earth every day with love to Christ so pure and perfect as to prompt him, if possible, to meet the descending Judge more than halfway. See iv. 17, note.

ii. 29-v. 12. GOD IS LOVE.

c. ii. 29-iii. 24. The Evidence of Sonship: Deeds of Righteousness before God.

The Children of God and the Children of the Devil (ii. 29-iii. 12).

Love and Hate: Life and Death (iii. 13-24).

29. "He is righteous . . . begotten of Him." The difficulty is to determine the antecedent of the pronouns "he" and "him." The last person mentioned is Christ the Judge. But "to be born of Christ" is not a scriptural idea. It is evident that John so firmly believed that the Father reveals Himself in His co-equal Son that he made the transition from one Divine Person to the other almost unwittingly.

"Is begotten of Him." He who in his character is like God is in Hebrew phrase begotten of Him. The habitually righteous man is a true son of the righteous God. Other points of likeness are faith and love.

CONCLUDING NOTE TO CHAPTER II.

The connection of thought in the first verse, expressed by "these things," reflects light upon the treatment of sin in Chapter I. Some earnestly contend that verses 8 and 10 teach the absolute presence of sin in every believer's heart after forgiveness has been bestowed and the new birth and purification by the Holy Spirit procured by the blood of Christ have been experienced. In other words, after grace has done its utmost the Christian has sin which he should confess. Now the natural effect of the doctrine that sin is inevitable is to give up the struggle against it and to yield ourselves unresistingly to its lusts. In fact, one exegete tells us, in view of the inevitableness of sin, that John was constrained to put in this caveat: These things I do not write that ye may sin. But he did not write thus, but in view of the turpitude of sin rendering the sinner false hearted and accusing God of lying, and considering the effectual provisions of grace in the atonement to transform and entirely sanctify the believer, so that sin is now in every case avoidable, "I write unto you that ye do not sin even once" (aorist tense denoting a single act). No bulwark against sin can be made out of the statement that the holiest saints on earth are sinners. But a positive restraint from sin exists in forgiveness, regeneration and entire sanctification by the Holy Spirit initiating us into a state of perfected holiness.

"If we say." "This 'if we' continues in almost every verse until ii. 3, after which it is changed into its equivalent 'he that,' which continues down to ii. 11; after that neither form is used." (Cambridge Bible for Schools.) Mark this, that "if we" is the exact equivalent of "he that." Substitute the latter for the former and the fallacy of the assertion that John includes himself where he says, "If we say we have no sin," immediately appears. Ebrard suggests "that 'if we say' is quite analogous to the 'though a man say,'" in James ii. 14. On that account we must not lay too much stress on the first person plural; it serves only to express the general "one," and only so far represents the universal application of the saying announced in verses 6, 7 (he might have said verses 8, 9 and 10 also); not as if St. John had meant to say, "even if I, the apostle, were to say this, and nevertheless walk in darkness, I should be a liar." Ebrard then argues extendedly that there is a radical difference between "having sin" and walking in darkness: "For the latter is assumed to be entirely excluded from the condition of a Christian, while the former must be acknowledged as present in every Christian" (the first person plural). Such contradiction and sophistication mar a great scholar and exegete who admits that "the Gnosticism of a Cerinthus, that enemy of the truth who was living in the same city with John himself, was confronting the apostle with the root of all the heresies -- docetic, pantheistic Gnosticism," which denied the existence of sin in the human spirit, insisting that it pollutes the body only, and hence that the unregenerated Gnostics had no need of the blood of Christ in atonement because they had before their professed conversion to Christ no sins to be expiated. If we admit with Episcopius, Grotius, Whedon and others that the phrase "to have no sin" denies the guilt of sins before conversion, we relieve the Epistle from the most glaring inconsistency and manifest contradiction, in asserting that a soul can be forgiven its sins and cleansed from all unrighteousness, and at the same time have sin entailing guilt such as is implied by John's idiomatic phrase, "to have sin."

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