

St. John Versus the Gnostics

by Daniel Steele

The Epistle of John emphasizes the importance of walking in the light and having fellowship with God, and warns against the error of gnosticism and the need for confession and cleansing through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Topics: "Gnosticism", "Sanctification"

Description

Daniel Steele expounds on the First Epistle of John, emphasizing the importance of understanding John's purpose in writing the epistle, which is to keep believers from sin. Steele addresses the errors of gnosticism that were prevalent during John's time, highlighting the false beliefs about God and sin. He delves into the concept of God being light and the necessity for believers to walk in the light, emphasizing the need for confession of sins and the cleansing power of Jesus' blood. Steele discusses the ongoing struggle between the old sinful nature and the new divine nature in believers, emphasizing the continuous reliance on the atoning merit of Jesus Christ for forgiveness and sanctification.

Transcript

I purpose to expound a very wonderful portion of the Word of God, The First Epistle of John. This epistle, written by John in his old age, is supposed by some to be the last utterance of inspiration. The first chapter, from the fourth verse to the twenty-eighth verse in the second chapter, is occupied with the proposition that God is light; and the second chapter, commencing at the twenty-ninth verse, extending to the fifth chapter, fifth verse, asserts that he that is born of God is righteous; and the last part, the few verses from the sixth to the twenty-first, is the conclusion and combination of these two principles.

In explaining the Epistle of John, or any other Epistle, we must observe the rules of interpretation: The first of these is, to observe the purpose of the writing. What is John aiming at-- what is his purpose? It is not every writer who expresses so plainly or so early in his epistles his purpose. In the beginning of the second chapter, he says,-- "these things write I unto you that ye sin not." The purpose of the epistle, then, is to keep believers from sin. Another principle of interpretation of any writer is, so to interpret him as to avoid making him contradict himself. If there is any utterance that seems to make him contradict himself, that utterance must be explained away so as to make the man harmonious with himself. A man would not plainly contradict his own statements, much less in a short letter that you can read in fifteen minutes, and still less if he claims to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit never contradicts Himself. The apparent contradiction must be explained in harmony with the other repeated declarations, especially if

the repeated declarations are in harmony with all other inspired teachings.

Now, John lived to see most of the errors that today attack the Christian Church spring up in germ form. He lived to see the time when there was imported from Greek philosophy, that form of error which is called gnosticism. We have agnostics in our day, who say God is an unknown, and an unknowable being. But the gnostics thought they could know God by their reason, like the German rationalists of modern times. One principle of gnosticism was that there existed in the universe two principles, good and evil.

One class said that God was the author of both these principles, and they therefore made Him a sort of double-headed monstrosity, partly good and partly evil, a two-faced being, both holy and sinful. Another class said evil was uncreated and eternal; that God found it in existence and could not eliminate it from the universe: that it had its hiding-place in matter, that matter itself is eternal: that when He created man, He did the best He could, but could not expel evil from matter, and therefore evil was bound to be in the human constitution existing in the material part.

Now for the interpretation of the first chapter. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life." Word is spelled with a capital, meaning the Logos, or personal Word described in John's gospel: "And the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory." What is remarkable here is that John insists, that that Word revealed Himself to us in material form, addressing our senses, hearing, seeing and feeling, the three chief senses by which we recognize the material world. He wishes to demonstrate that the incarnation is a reality and not a shadow. "For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness and show unto you that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us."

It is said that no man is a hero to his body servant, who sees all his failings and faults and infirmities. Do you know that the human being who was the most intimate with the Lord Jesus Christ, who leaned on His breast, was the very man who writes this? Instead of familiarity breeding contempt, the very familiarity which John had with Jesus brought this overwhelming sense of His Divinity, His Godhead, and hence he speaks of Him as the Life, the eternal Life which was with the Father, "and" which "was manifested unto us." "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us. When men find anything that is especially excellent, they want to get a patent right on it and secure the advantages to themselves. But John did not want any patent right on his discovery of life eternal in the Lord Jesus; he wanted to mount the housetop, and, putting a speaking trumpet to his lips, shout to all the world to share his blessedness. "That ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ."

John kept very select company, but the company was not so select but that he wanted the whole human family to share it. "And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full." Those of you who have the "Revision" open before you will find that the revisers have found a difference in the manuscripts, and it is written, "that our joy may be full". From this we infer this truth: that no Christian's joy is full until he has told somebody about it: no Christian's joy is complete until he has published it abroad, till he has invited somebody to share it, and the more he can invite to share this joy, the higher the wellspring within his own bosom.

"This then is the message which we have heard of Him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." The Greek is very emphatic here -- not a fleck, not a spot. Here John strikes the

great error which seemed to ascribe both good and evil to God. If good and evil were bound up in God, if sin and holiness were bound up in God, then man could consistently say. "I have participation and fellowship with God, even if I live in conscious, daily sin, for God is a being of mixed character, and I am like Him in that sense. Now, in inculcating holiness upon men, John must see that the conception of the model is right, and hence he aims to clear the character of God of all such false conceptions; and this is the way he starts out, this is the message -- "that God is light," undimmed, unmixed light, in whom is no darkness at all, not a fleck of darkness nor of evil nor of sin in His nature. You see John does not prove this, he simply asserts it; that is the style of John, the nearest writer to the Lord Jesus in his form of expression. The Lord Jesus did not often reason, but spoke from authority, gave expression to His own intuitions of truth. And John, as an intuitive writer, simply announces his intuitions, St. Paul reasons -- has long and involved chains of argument. Hence John makes the declaration, under the illumination of the divine Spirit, that God is unmixed in His character, a being of unmixed holiness, love, truth, and in Him is nothing to the contrary. Now, then, he can clinch his nail. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness," in an element that is directly contrary to His character, there is a great mistake somewhere, a falsehood somewhere; the truth is not in the utterance. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him," participation of His moral likeness, "and" still "walk in darkness," walk in sin, in untruth, "we lie," John is a very outspoken writer; he does not mince matters and say we are mistaken and do not the truth, do not exemplify the truth, do not live out the truth, but, "we lie, and do not the truth." He then goes on: "But if we walk in the light," abstain from sin, are victorious over sin, "if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin."

A large school of writers insists that cleansing signifies a judicial clearance from sin, and that it is only a Jewish form of expressing justification by faith, or the pardon of sin. People who do not believe in the real, radical, thorough cleansing of the sin principle through the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord, are too apt to take this view, that it is only a Hebrew form of expressing justification by faith.

But hold on, let us see what becomes of it, if this is so. We have here a plan for justification by faith. Do you know what is the condition that St. Paul lays down? Why, repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ. What is the condition laid down here? Walking in the light. We are reduced therefore to the Roman Catholic style of justification by faith, which consists in a long series of good works, the works eclipsing the faith, taking the precedence, and eliminating finally faith itself. A long series of good works conditions the pardon of sin as taught here, if the word cleansing means simply justification by faith. It must mean then something else. It must mean just what it says in the last clause of the ninth verse: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." It must mean inherent, internal purification of the nature through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Whosoever is born of God, doth not commit sin." This is my idea of a justified state. I believe justification is a very great work; I do not believe in belittling justification, or regeneration, in order to make more of sanctification. "Whosoever is born of God, doth not commit sin for His seed remaineth in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God." That is, to be born of God is to be like God, to take on His moral likeness; and whoever is possessed of that moral likeness to God, while retaining such a likeness will not sin against God. So from the very beginning the truly justified and regenerate soul is endued with grace to be victorious over acts of sin. But it costs a struggle; the remains of the old nature are within, "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary one to the other, in order that ye may not do the things that ye would." Thank God for the Revision upon that point, in that text which

has been a pillow under the head of many a man to comfort him in a life of sin! The Revision teaches "in order that ye may not sin" (Gal. v. 17), in striking contrast to the conflict going on in the seventh chapter of the epistle to the Romans, where it is all on the level of nature, the upper story in conflict with the lower, the conscience in collision with the animal and sinful propensities. In the hopeless struggle delineated in Romans seventh, the Holy Spirit does not appear as one of the combatants in the strife going on in the breast of the unregenerate, yet thoughtful moralist. But in Gal. v. 17, He appears on the field of conflict in the regenerate soul before it has reached the moment where sin is instantaneously slain by the power of God, through faith in the all-atoning blood of His Son. Yet, as I understand it, there is grace available by which every regenerate soul from the moment of regeneration may go on in a career of victory, never falling into acts of sin.

Thus we see two principles in the unsanctified man's heart: the old tendencies toward sin still remaining in his nature, unpurged away, and the new principle of divine love to God lodged in his nature. A temptation is presented to the man's soul; the evil in his nature inclines him to yield to the temptation; the Spirit strives to keep him from doing the thing that he would. A good act is presented to him, and the flesh strives to keep him from performing that good act; so there is this conflict between the two, the flesh trying to keep a man from performing good, and the Spirit trying to keep a man from performing evil. This is the exposition of that passage. If you want as high authority as Meyer, the great German commentator who probably had the largest grammatical knowledge of the New Testament of any man who has lived for two centuries, in connection with so deep a spiritual insight as that of Tholuck, you have this authority, for the exposition I have given.

Now, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." I wish you to notice the connection in which these words stand. The connection is this: "If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, . . . the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Now if the "we" here means the persons cleansed, just spoken of when it says, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin," we must convict this inspired writer of a manifest contradiction in affirming that the same persons are cleansed from all sin and yet are still living in sin. It is very much like saying that vaccination is a prophylactic against small-pox, but if any one tries it, and proves it is so, he is a liar. Or quinine is a specific against fevers, especially malarial fevers, but if any one tries it, and is cured, and makes declaration of the fact, it is false. That is the absurdity to which John is reduced by that kind of exposition.

He is addressing a class of men who believe there is no sin in their souls. This is one fallacy of the gnostics, they believe that these two principles of good and evil exist in the world, run on parallel lines, and never touch. The sin principle they believe to be only in the body, the envelope of the soul, never staining the soul itself. The sin is all laid off upon the body, and is only a seeming sin; the soul is not a sinner, and is unpolluted. A person may appear to be a great sinner, mixed up strangely with sin, but he is not. And the figure they used was this: You may cast a gold ring into a hogpen, and have it trodden down in the filth there, and it remains gold still; the filth does not really touch or render the gold impure. And so the gold of their souls remained pure and holy, though their bodies were full of sin, of drunkenness, of lust, of all iniquity.

That is the class of men John had to deal with, a class that sprang up in the age of the apostle, and to them he says, If you say you have no sin that needs the atonement, that needs the cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, you utter a falsehood, and the truth is not in you. But if you own up and make a clean breast of it, and confess you are a sinner before God, and flee to the great fountain of cleansing, then what follows? We shall see: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins," and to go a step further, not only to forgive the sins that have reference to the past, but to cleanse the nature from the sin principle which is in it, "from all unrighteousness." I think this exposition renders John a self-consistent writer, eliminates all contradiction from the passage, and, in view of the gnostic errors prevailing at that time, is the sound exposition of that text. "If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us," This is true of every one who has committed one wilful sin. He needs the atoning blood of Christ for his pardon.

There were two classes of gnostics, one of which conceived the principles of good and evil to run parallel and never touch, while the other class believed that good and evil intermingled, interpenetrated; -- the evil in the body staining the spirit, and that, therefore, so long as the spirit was in the body, entire sanctification was an impossibility. I throw myself back upon St. Paul, who flatly contradicts that doctrine in his wonderful prayer in Thessalonians, fifth chapter, twenty-third verse: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit, and soul, and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." St. Paul here expresses the idea that the soul may be sanctified wholly, and the body may be sanctified entirely. The soul is a kind of border-land between pure spirit and the body, according to metaphysicians. There is another passage of St. Paul's expressing the same idea, and that is in second Corinthians, seventh chapter and first verse: "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." "Filthiness of the flesh" means all sins that find expression through the flesh, gluttony, drunkenness, the narcotic appetite, -- I hope I shall not wound anyone, -- sluggishness, pampering of the body, -- you can carry out the thought, -- all sins that find expression through the body, all gratification of unlawful appetite. But St. Paul has not got through yet: "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit," the other element, the spirit. I suppose a pure spirit, that is a disembodied spirit, free from all entanglement of matter, as we conceive Satan to be, may be guilty of very many sins. Satan is a great unbeliever to begin with, full of pride and malignity and disobedience, and all forms of sin that may dwell in a disembodied spirit. So man's spirit is all polluted by sin, but God can cleanse it completely.

Before closing this paper I will say one thing more, I believe if any man says, however holy he may be at the present time, however the work of God by the divine Spirit may have purged him, soul and body, from all sin, if he says he can live half an hour without the atonement, he is a greatly mistaken man; if he says he can live one minute without the atonement, he is a mistaken man, That is where much of fanaticism comes in. If the devil cannot ride a truth down, he will raise up various clouds of fanaticism and misunderstanding about it.

I stand every day and every hour and every moment upon the atoning merit of the Lord Jesus Christ. I believe that all so-called sins of ignorance, -- read the fourth chapter of the book of Leviticus, -- all infirmities, ignorances, failures, need continually the blood of sprinkling. Sometimes I am inclined to go as far as President Wayland, that justification by faith is a series of repeated acts every moment of a man's life, a series of acts on the part of God to a justified believer, pardoning him. Whether this is so or not I do not know, but I do believe with respect to our inmost spiritual condition, we stand only upon the ground of

the atoning merit of Christ, and are saved only as we continually exercise real faith in the great atonement, or, as it is said sometimes, in a phrase I never exactly liked, "being kept under the blood."

"Every moment, Lord, I need

The merit of Thy death."

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