



1 John 1:1-10
Encouragement: 1 John
“If We Claim...”

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September 10th, 2023

This morning we launch into a new series on one of the letters, or what we often call “epistles”, of the New Testament, called First John. Like a lot of letters – both letters in the New Testament and letters that we might write – there is an overarching purpose to the letter, with a number of related themes and sub-points as well. But it’s largely a letter encouraging the readers in their faith. Here’s how one writer puts it, **“1 John was written to encourage faithful struggling believers that they were holding on to the truth and to help them persevere while others had been taken in by false teaching” (Ray Van Neste)**. Another author writes, “John wrote his first letter, 1 John, to encourage Christians to Christ and ‘love one another simply because ‘God is love and He first loved us’.”¹ And so, “Encouragement” is the title of this series that we begin today.

As I usually do when starting a series that’s going through a book of the Bible, I want to talk about some of the historical background of the book, the author, and so forth. If you’re not into that kind of thing and you want to take a nap for a few minutes 😊 ...don’t. This is important stuff that helps us understand the context, and make more sense of what’s being written, why it’s being written, and what it means for us today, helps us to have more confidence/trust in Scripture...and I promise to present it in an engaging way. 😊

So, from the get-go, in the early church, 1 John – as well as the shorter letters of 2 and 3 John – was attributed to John the writer of the Gospel According to John. Who is that? It’s John the disciple of Jesus known as John the son of Zebedee. There are thematic, vocabulary, and grammatical similarities between them, helping to link them together. That’s how this stuff is determined - he didn’t title this “1 John”; that was added later so people like you and me could navigate our way through the Bible. He’s just writing a letter to a group of Christians who need some encouragement and guidance.

This John is also the likely writer of Revelation. **This makes John the third most prolific writer in the New Testament.** Luke is first – the gospel

according to Luke and the book of Acts were both written by him – and Paul is second, with a number of letters in the New Testament written by him, mostly to churches that he helped start in different cities. And then John.

Now: **The letter of 1 John was highly regarded in the early church – even as early as the 100’s A.D.** For instance, there’s a guy named Polycarp of Smyrna – which sounds like you’re talking about a bunch of fish (Polycarp = many carp) swimming in Russian vodka (Smyrna), but in fact Polycarp was a church bishop who lived in the city of Smyrna which is in modern-day Turkey. In Greek, his name actually means “much fruit.” So, that’s actually a pretty cool name for a church leader. He was born in 69 A.D., and died in 155 A.D., martyred because of his faith. But I digress...this guy, Polycarp of Smyrna, quotes 1 John in a letter he wrote to the church in Philippi in about the 130’s A.D. In fact, he quotes or paraphrases from 17 of the 27 New Testament books and letters.²

This kind of thing is a component of what helped determine which writings from the first century became part of the Bible, which happened a couple hundred years later: were documents quoted or referenced in other writings? Were they well-accepted broadly by Christians, or was it just some random person who has a letter they claim is authentic and should be in the Bible? Because those quotes and references, and broad acceptance help us see which writings were valued by the very first Christians as authentic and trustworthy. And 1 John is one of those quoted in this letter by Polycarp. (Expecting a boy? Consider “Polycarp”!)

As for the writing of 1 John: **This letter of 1 John was likely written in the mid to late 80’s A.D., or perhaps as late as the early 90’s.** And as I said earlier, he’s writing to encourage a group of Christians, perhaps in modern day Turkey, though the exact audience or their location is not known. It is filled with inspiration and reassurance about the core truths of the Gospel; comparing and contrasting the values of Jesus and his followers to the values of the world: love vs. hate, light vs. dark, Christ vs. antichrist, etc. So, let’s dive in. We’ll read the whole first chapter this morning, 10 verses. This is God’s word to you and me today...1 John 1:1-10. Pray.

So, right off the bat we get this claim, in multiple ways, to being an eye-witness to Jesus. “Seen with our eyes”...“hands have touched”...“seen it and testify to it”...“appeared to us”...“what we have seen and heard”. These are important phrases to note. For one, it gives a sense of veracity to the rest of the letter. This is a person who walked and talked with Jesus. Now, the skeptic might say, “Anyone could write that...” And I suppose it’s true. Someone could be making this up. If so, they’re the worst of liars and scammers because so much of the letter is about living morally and ethically. We see that in the second half of today’s passage, even, and it’s throughout the letter. And usually, scammers like that are found out and their scam comes crashing down.

When someone is faking their goodness, faking their kindness, faking their loveliness, faking their patience and their trustworthiness...eventually, the house of cards comes crashing down. **This letter stood the test of “is this trustworthy” because people at the time knew the writer. They knew John.** They knew what his writing was like, what his faith was like, that he had been with Jesus. He taught many of them the ways of Jesus himself. So, the letter is deemed trustworthy right from the get-go – it’s one of the reasons Polycarp quotes from it.

But this proclamation of being a witness to Jesus is so important. You and I may not be able to be first-hand eye witnesses to Jesus and his teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection. **But we are witnesses to what God is doing in our lives, in the lives of others, in our church, and more.** We’ve experienced Jesus moving mountains to make things happen. Some of us have experienced physical healings that cannot be explained by medicine; some of us have experienced life transformation that has no other explanation. These things are witness to God’s work in our lives and in the world, and sharing them, talking about them, telling people about what God has done is a vital component of being a disciple of Jesus.

And it’s not just for our own benefit. It’s for others. Look at verse 3: **“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us” (1 John 1:3).** Look...recalling how God has touched your own life absolutely helps keep our own faith on the straight and

narrow path. When we've got questions, it's good to remember the times when God's grace and his presence was evident and obvious.

But, sharing how we have experienced Jesus is for the benefit of others as well. Just as we benefit when we hear other people share their "God-moments," so other people benefit when you and I do the same. It encourages them, it draws them into a deeper walk with Jesus. In some cases, you might share something with a *non-believer* and it plants a seed for faith that blooms much later, or opens their eyes to the reality of Jesus' presence with them right in that moment. And as they move closer to the Lord and eventually come to a place of faith, it draws them into fellowship with us...fellowship that is built on and centered on Jesus. He is what draws the church in fellowship together.

Continuing on in the second half of the passage, **John gets more specific about the message they have proclaimed, and it gets to the heart of the gospel: Our sin has separated us from God, but God makes a way to mend the breach.** When we walk in sin, we walk in the darkness, and yet God is light. There's no darkness in him. And so, the dark sin of our lives separates us from him...it breaks our fellowship with him, just as sin breaks fellowship with people. As he says in verse 6, if we claim to have fellowship with God, and yet continue to walk in the darkness, continue to live in sin, he says "we lie and do not live out the truth."

Now: In the next verse (7) he goes on to say that Jesus purifies us from all sin and he reiterates that in verse 9 as well. This is a basic, core, gospel truth, that we read throughout the New Testament – from Jesus' teachings, to Paul to John to other writers of the New Testament as well. So this is yet another reiteration of what Jesus' death on the cross means. In regards to verse six that "if we claim fellowship with Jesus but walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth," this grace and forgiveness means that: **Even when we live unfaithfully to Jesus, he is still faithful to us; we can't wipe out the truth of the cross, even if we don't live out that truth and draw others to it all the time.** So, sin still causes cracks in our relationship with God, and of course sin causes cracks in the relationships, or the fellowship, we have with others. But when we walk in the light of Jesus, when we live

out the truths of the gospel – the truth of his grace, the truth of his forgiveness, the truth of holy living he calls us to – when we live lives that look like Jesus, then we have fellowship with one another. Our relationships are good. **In other words, when we're in tune with Jesus, we're in tune with one another.**

Probably most of you have been to an orchestra or band concert where one person will play a note – concert B flat for a band, and concert A for an orchestra – A 440 – and everyone tunes to it. I still remember playing trumpet for an orchestra performance in high school – in fact, it was a competition with judges – and the other trumpet player, on stage, when the A came ringing out from the first violinist, the other trumpet player didn't realize it was a different note than what we tuned to in band, and played B-flat. I don't know how we'd gotten this far without tuning with the orchestra, but we hadn't. And it took him like three notes to get it right – on stage, in front of judges. It was pretty embarrassing for him, and the look that our director gave him? Let's just say that the phrase “if looks could kill” comes to mind. Anyway, we tune to one instrument.

The other option would be one person tunes to that instrument, and then the next person tunes to that second one, and the fourth person tunes to the third person, and the fifth person tunes to the fourth, and on it would go. Not only is it an inefficient use of time, it's also less likely to have everyone in tune, because there can be minor variations from one to another, and by the time you get to the last person, he or she could be quite a ways off from the original person who started it. It would be like a musical version of the telephone game. By having everyone tune to the same instrument, not only is it more efficient, but more importantly, it's much more accurate. Everyone tunes to the same pitch.

Similarly, we get in tune with Jesus, and as we each do that, we get in tune with each other. We have good fellowship together. Now, because of sin it isn't 100% perfect...but it keeps the standard consistent and unchanging. Jesus doesn't change. You're not tuning yourself up to your spouse or your parents or Bible study partner, teacher, classmate, neighbor or

your pastor. We tune to Jesus. So, let me begin to draw this to a close with a few questions, such as...

Where is your life out of tune with Jesus? Or, in the language of the passage, where is there darkness in your life? Where is your relationship, your fellowship, with Jesus and with others, on shaky ground because sin has crept in? In the case of fellowship with other people, the brokenness may not be all your fault...you're a sinner and so are they...but what in that relationship *can* you control? Where have you not lived with forgiveness, or grace, or love? Where has pride and judgmentalism been the lens through which you view your fellowship with others? Where is your fellowship with Jesus broken because of the shadows in your life? These kinds of questions are so important to keep in front of us on a regular basis, because our life always proclaims something, and we want to proclaim Jesus. We want to proclaim the values of the Kingdom of God, we want to proclaim God's goodness and grace and power and more – with our lives and with our voice, too. But if we're living in the shadows and staying in the shadows, it's difficult to proclaim the light of Jesus. We undermine Jesus' mission through us.

So: If we claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior, then let's live more like Jesus. We're not going to be perfect, but that doesn't mean we give up trying, and we keep coming back to him for forgiveness, repenting of our sin and turning away from it, and turning toward Jesus more and more. Keep getting in tune with him. Keep coming back to Jesus and the standard that Jesus sets. Read his word, be in prayer, confess your sin, seek forgiveness. Be in fellowship with others who are aiming to be aligned with Jesus as well and who will help keep you in tune with Jesus. And then keep proclaiming the good news of Jesus so that other people – whether they're Jesus followers already or not – might grow to be more in fellowship with you and with Jesus than they are right now. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ <https://the-scriptures.co.uk/sermons/sermon-series/1-john-sermon-series/>

² Polycarp is really interesting to read about. He's an important link to the Apostles (he studied under the disciple John). You can read more about him in lots of places online. Here's one: <https://isjesusalive.com/polycarp-early-use-of-new-testament/>