

Lesson 1: *A Repentant Lifestyle*

When you find yourself falling again and again in a similar area - stuck in some habitual sin - what affect does it have on your life? How do you usually try to remedy the situation?

READ 1John 1:1-2:2

1. What is the purpose of this letter according to verses 1-4? What do these verses (particularly the reference to “what we have heard, seen, and our hands have touched”) tell you generally about the nature of the Christian faith, and particularly our fellowship with God? What is John trying to get across about “fellowship with God?”
2. How do you many people react to the claim that genuine fellowship with God is a real possibility? Why do they react this way, and how can you respond to them?
3. These verses paint a picture of pure, sweet communion with God, which many of us do not enjoy so regularly. What are some of the reasons our own fellowship with God may be lacking?
4. In looking at verses 5-10, what is a major hindrance to true fellowship? What claims do people make to pretend that sin doesn't effect their relationship with God?
5. If according to Scripture their is no condemnation in Christ (Romans 8:1) and our guilt has been removed (Hebrews 10:22), then why does our sin still get in the way?
6. In verse 2:1, what is John’s purpose in writing these things? How does what he has written in these first ten verses relate to that goal?
7. Notice that although John *says* he has written these words so we “would not sin,” he is also pragmatic by following it with, “But if anybody does sin...” What solution does John suggest on a personal level? How should this manifest itself on a daily basis? What are some other ways we seek solutions for our sin? Why do we seek other solutions, and why are the inadequate?
8. Essentially, John is calling us to a life of ongoing faith and repentance. What is repentance? What is its role in the Christian life? Why is it so important, and why are we doomed to a life of discouragement and depression without it?

Leader Notes:1 John 1:1-2:2

Main Points: John's chief concern in this passage is communicating the possibility for every Christian to have fellowship with God, along with the serious prospect of that fellowship being temporarily lost through living a life of sin. He wants Christians to take their sin with the utmost seriousness, knowing it can destroy this precious communion, which alone has the ability to bring joy. He further demonstrates how that fellowship can be restored - namely through the continual application of the gospel to oneself through a daily life of faith and repentance. Basically, John points out that sin is inexcusable. Therefore, we ought not to seek to justify our sin or blame it in on someone else. It ought to be taken seriously and not treated lightly, but sin *is* inevitable. Until we die we will have to deal with the reality of indwelling sin in our lives, and sin is forgivable because of God's mercy through Christ.

Commentary on the passage and notes on the questions:

1. *What is the purpose of this letter according to verses 1-4? What do these verses (particularly the reference to "what we have heard, seen, and our hands have touched") tell you generally about the nature of the Christian faith, and particularly our fellowship with God? What is John trying to get across about "fellowship with God?"*

John states his reason for writing to be the encouragement of his readers to seek out fellowship with the Father and the Son. There must be 'vertical' fellowship before there can be 'horizontal' fellowship. The reason he starts the letter this way is to assure people that this fellowship with God is no mere fiction or result of flights of fancy. It is as real and sure as any fellowship we have with human beings. For the one with whom they have fellowship with is one of whom they have heard, seen, looked at and touched. The Christian faith refuses to be put in the category of a belief system of nice, abstract ideas to which someone might respond, "I'm glad that is true for you and works for you." Christianity claims to be grounded in history and to be objectively true. It follows then, that our fellowship with God is a reality to be enjoyed!

2. *How do you many people react to the claim that genuine fellowship with God is a real possibility? Why do they react this way, and how can you respond to them?*

Many people outside the faith often think such a claim to be foolish, and those who have this fellowship are, at best, duped by their own psychological needs. As John Newton wrote, "That God is to be worshipped, is generally acknowledged; but that they who worship him in spirit and truth, have real fellowship and communion with him, is known only to themselves. The world can neither understand or believe it... However, they who have tasted that the Lord is gracious, will not be disputed out of their spiritual senses. If they are competent judges whether they ever saw the light, or felt the beams of the sun, they are no less certain that, by the knowledge of the gospel, they 'are brought into a state of communion with God.'" To the skeptic, J.I. Packer has written in *Knowing God*, "I ask you for the moment to stop your ears to those who tell you there is no road to knowledge about God, and come with me a little way and see. After all, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and anyone who is actually following a recognized road will not be too worried if he hears non-travelers telling each other that no such road exists."

3. *These verses paint a picture of pure, sweet communion with God, which many of us do not enjoy so regularly. What are some of the reasons our own fellowship with God may be lacking?*

This question hits much closer to home. Sometimes the reason we consider ourselves duped as to whether communion with God is a genuine possibility is that we do not engage in the requisite activities. Packer in *Keep in Step with the Spirit* writes, "One reason why the experiential reality of perceiving God is unfamiliar country today is that the pace and preoccupations of urbanized, mechanized, collectivized, secularized modern life are such that any sort of inner life (apart from the existentialist *Angst* of society's misfits and the casualties of the rat race) is very hard to maintain. To make prayer your life priority, as countless Christians of former days did outside as well as inside the monastery, is stupendously difficult in a world that runs you off your feet and will not let you slow down. And if you attempt it, you will certainly seem eccentric to your peers, for nowadays involvement in a stream of programmed activities is decidedly 'in,' and the older ideal of a quiet, contemplative life is just as decidedly 'out.' That there is widespread hunger today for more intimacy, warmth, and affection in our fellowship with God is clear... but the concept of Christian life as sanctified rush and bustle still dominates, and as a result the experiential side of Christian holiness remains very much a closed book." Some convicting food for thought! You might want to read this quote to your group ask for their reactions.

4. *In looking at verses 5-10, what is a major hindrance to true fellowship? What claims do people make to pretend that sin doesn't effect their relationship with God?*

In verses 5 - 10, John discusses the effects of sin on our relationship with God and the various strategies people use to deal with their sin. His initial statement: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all," is John's way of communicating that sin breaks fellowship with God. The Scriptures are packed with this truth: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong" (Hab.1:13); "You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence" (Psalm 5:4,5); "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." (Isaiah 59:2) John then goes on to show the different excuses and strategies used to avoid facing our sinfulness seriously: we either deny we have any significant sin, deny that it affects our relationship with God, or we acknowledge it and confess it. All attempts to justify our behavior or deny it are ultimately self-defeating, for they keep us from the one thing that can bring fulfillment – confession and repentance, in which God makes known his concern and love for us.

5. *If according to Scripture there is no condemnation in Christ (Romans 8:1) and our guilt has been removed (Hebrews 10:22), then why does our sin still get in the way?*

The sensitive believer asks, "Does what John is saying mean that when I sin, God no longer loves me? If my sin - past, present, and future - is forgiven on the basis of what Christ has done, and my standing with God is secure - then how am I to view my present sin which breaks my fellowship with God?" We need to recognize is the distinction between our *legal and personal* relationship with God. Legally, we stand completely acceptable to God, being clothed in Christ's righteousness. Through Jesus, we are viewed as innocent and completely without guilt. However, there is not only a legal relationship, but also a personal relationship. It is in that personal relationship that fellowship can be broken. A mother's child remains her child no matter what that child might do, but the personal relationship can most definitely be harmed. In reflecting on this problem, John Owen asks the question, "Does God then love his people while they are sinning? Yes! He loves his people, but he does not love their sinning. Doesn't God's love change towards them? Not the purpose of his will to love them, but the working out of his gracious acts and disciplines towards them is changed. He rebukes them, disciplines them, hides his face from them, but woe to us if he should change his love, or take away his kindness from us!"

6. *In verse 2:1, what is John's purpose in writing these things? How does what he has written in these first ten verses relate to that goal?*

John clearly states in 2:1 that his purpose in writing is so that they will not sin. How has what he has written serve as a motivation to stop sinning? As long as you remain at rest in your sin there can be no fellowship - the very thing for which you were created. If you fail to see sin as serious you lose access to the very thing which Christianity offers at its core. Verses 1:5 - 2:1 can be summarized as: "Sin is serious. It is dangerous. Therefore, do not sin." If people in your group do not come to this conclusion, they have missed John's first major point and his pastoral goal - "take your sin seriously."

7. *Notice that although John says he has written these words so we "would not sin," he is also pragmatic by following it with, "But if anybody does sin..." What solution does John suggest on a personal level? How should this manifest itself on a daily basis? What are some other ways we seek solutions for our sin? Why do we seek other solutions, and why are the inadequate?*

John is a realist. He knows he and his readers will sin. Having mentioned that we should not sin, he immediately goes on to tell us what recourse we have when we do sin. What is the recourse? *Applying the gospel to yourself through faith and repentance.* John points to those burdened by sin back to the basic truth of justification by faith. By an act of free grace, God pardons our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight on the basis of what Christ has done on the cross. Through no effort of our own, we are made children of God whom he loves and in whom he delights. Many may know this is the way one begins the Christian life. However, many also forget it is how we are to continue in the Christian life. It begins in grace and ends in grace. We forget that our *continued* acceptance is dependent upon God and instead, we begin living as though we have to earn it, by trying harder, feeling badly, engaging more fervently in the disciplines of the Christian life, and doing good works. Each of these things may have their place, but none is an adequate means to restore our relationship with God. Why? Because we cannot offer God a payoff. Only the perfect, sinless sacrifice of Christ can settle our debt! Though we started with a recognition of our own unworthiness before God, as we move along we begin to think that perhaps now there is some worthiness we can plead to make us acceptable before God. But, the only worthiness we will ever have before God is that which we have in Christ. To believe otherwise is to have a thoroughly inadequate view of sin's continuing effect in our lives. We can expect, of course, that our lives will increasingly change as God works in us. But if we hope to be restored to fellowship, pleading Christ's righteousness alone is our sole recourse. Don't bring anything else with you. We are to start each day on Luther's platform: "I am accepted. God is my loving, heavenly Father. He sees me as he sees Jesus and he loves me as he loves Jesus."

8. *Essentially, John is calling us to a life of ongoing faith and repentance. What is repentance? What is its role in the Christian life? Why is it so important, and why are we doomed to a life of discouragement and depression without it?*

When speaking of maintaining fellowship with God, it is important to talk about the attitude with which you go to Christ for forgiveness. John says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us." If the previous question's main thrust is to emphasize Christ as the atoning sacrifice alone and to discount all other means of atonement, this question emphasizes repentance. Luther said, "all of life is repentance." Indeed, repentance is implicit in the Biblical notion of faith. They are two sides of the same coin and are to be exercised day in and day out by the Christian. Repentance needs to be understood not as something God demands of you before he will take you back. Repentance is to go in God's direction rather than following your own. There is an important distinction between remorse, which is basically just regret for the consequences of an action, and repentance, which is a genuine heart change, *regardless of*

the consequences. For example, the fact that Judas hung himself after he betrayed Jesus indicates he was remorseful, but not repentant. To have been repentant would have driven Judas back to the arms of his heavenly Father, rather than into the pit of despair. Failing to take repentance seriously means you will more than likely continually repeat the same sin over and over. Ignoring this discipline means you strengthen sin's power over you and unhindered fellowship with God is the exception rather than the norm. Indeed, when besetting sins plague us, we may have never truly repented. We may not have seen the sin to be as odious as it is to God.

C.S. Lewis wonderfully demonstrates this dynamic of faith and repentance in, *The Horse and His Boy*. It is the story of a little slave boy named Shasta and a horse who had been kidnapped. Both had evil and oppressive masters and when brought together, they made plans to escape. Their conversation reads:

“By the way, I suppose you know how to ride?” said the Horse.

“Oh yes, of course,” said Shasta. “At least, I’ve ridden the donkey.”

“Ridden the *what*? In other words you can’t ride. That’s a drawback. I’ll have to teach you as we go along. If you can’t ride can you fall?”

“I suppose anyone can fall,” said Shasta.

“I mean can you fall and get up again without crying and mount again and fall again and yet not be afraid of falling.”

“I - I’ll try,” said Shasta.

“Poor little beast,” said the horse in a gentler tone. “I forgot you’re only a foal. We’ll make a fine rider of you in time.”

This is a wonderful picture of what it means to live the Christian life. Everytime we fall, we are called to get back up again, looking to God's love and provision for us in Christ. We are to repent of our sins, recognize our own powerlessness, and try again in dependence upon him. As time goes on, we will find ourselves staying on the horse longer and longer. Other lessons in the Christian life will help us break our besetting sins, just as there are other things to learn in riding a horse besides how to fall, but learning to fall in such a way that you get up again is foundational. Francis Fenelon said, “Do not be discouraged by your faults. Bear with yourself in correcting them, as you would with a neighbor.” Lewis says we may be sure that perfect chastity, like perfect charity, will not be attained by human efforts. You must ask for God's help, and even when you have done so, it may seem to you for a long time that no help, or less help than you need, is being given. Never mind. After each failure, ask forgiveness, pick yourself up, and try again. However important chastity (or courage, or truthfulness, or any other virtue) may be, this process of repentance trains us in habits of the soul that are more important still. It cures our illusions about ourselves and teaches us to depend on God. We learn on the one hand, that we cannot trust ourselves even in our best moments, and, on the other, that we need not despair even in our worst, for our failures are forgiven.

Individual Study

READ 1 John 1:1-2:2

1. From what you can tell, what is the major point John is trying to get across in this passage? Summarize it in one or two sentences.
2. According to John, what is it that prevents us from experiencing fellowship with God?
3. Are there other things which serve as obstacles to fellowship with God? If so, what are they?
4. How can these obstacles be overcome? What concrete steps can you take to establish more consistent fellowship with God?

READ Psalm 51

1. What does this psalm teach you about repentance? How essential is repentance to the Christian life and why?
2. What does it teach me about the positive effects repentance can have on a person's life?

READ 1 John 1:1-2:2

1. What does this passage teach you about sin and the different ways (both legitimate and illegitimate) with which it can be dealt?
2. When you find yourself falling again and again in a similar area, when you are stuck in some habitual sin, what affect does it have on your life?
3. How do you usually try to remedy the situation? Do you find your remedies tend to work? If not, why? What do you suppose John would say is the remedy?

READ Psalm 63

1. What does this passage convey about our need for fellowship with God and God's willingness to meet that need?
2. When the psalmist says, "Your love is better than life," what is he trying to get across? How would that belief affect the ordering of his life? What things would he do and what would he avoid?
3. Use this Psalm to worship and praise God, making its words your own.

Lesson 2: *Freedom for Obedience*

Consistency - being steadfast and steady - whether it regards a diet, a friendship, or one's walk before God - is something with which we all struggle. What makes it such a difficulty? What things get in the way of being a person of integrity, consistency, and follow-through?

READ 1 John 2:3-14

1. In a sentence, what would you say is John's overarching concern in this passage? How is it related to the preceding passage?
2. According to verses 3-5, what is involved in knowing God?
3. Why are personal *knowledge* and personal *acknowledgement* of God's character essential elements of knowing him? Why is it crucial to understand this and what are the consequences if one does not?
4. What do you think John means when he says the person who obeys God has God's love "made complete" in him or her? What is he trying to emphasize, and why is it important to have God's love "made complete" in you?
5. What command is John writing about in verse 7? How can it be new and old at the same time? What gives the commandment a sense of newness since Christ's coming?
6. How would you define 'love' and 'hate'? Can you think of someone in your life who has the ability to love with particular skill? What are some specific ways in which this gift has been manifested towards you or others?
7. Why would love for our brothers serve as a test of being in the light?
8. How would verses 12-14 have been encouraging, and why would these kinds of words be particularly appropriate following on the heels of what John has already said? What does his differentiation between groups tell us about how we are to care for people?

Pray

- ◆ That the quality of care and love that John expected in the lives of Christians would be present in your group's life and relationships.
- ◆ That all would grow in personal *knowledge* of God, and personal *acknowledgement* of God in all areas of our lives.

Leader Notes 1 John 2:3-2:14

MAIN POINTS: In the first chapter of John's letter, he emphasizes the importance of avoiding sin and living lives of repentance. John drives home the truth that we deceive ourselves if we do not routinely acknowledge the power of sin, our propensity as fallen creatures to sin, and our need of God's grace through Jesus to overcome sin. He exhorts us to embrace the joyful fellowship we can have with our Father through repentance. In chapter two, John focuses on our responsibility to live lives of integrity as believers. If we claim to know God, then our lives should be evidence of that knowledge. If the light of Christ is indeed in us, then it will flow out of us in our words and deeds. John calls us to 'walk our talk' in this lesson.

COMMENTARY ON PASSAGE AND NOTES ON THE QUESTIONS:

1. *In a sentence, what would you say is John's overarching concern in this passage? How is it related to the preceding passage?*

Essentially, John is saying that whole-hearted, full-time obedience is central to knowing God, and without it, claims to know God and be in fellowship with him must be viewed with suspicion. Part time obedience, selectively choosing which commands you will heed and which you won't, or obeying while people are watching you but not when you are alone, are all things which should cause us to call into question our claims to know God.

Because all of us are inconsistent, a person reading this passage could unnecessarily come under accusation about his or her salvation. First, don't interpret this apart from John's teaching in the first chapter that we all do sin. In this passage, John must be addressing those who are callously inconsistent, care little about obedience, and who are making no progress in the Christian life. Second, the solution to this kind of attack is nothing other than that which was outlined in the first study - we are to take our inconsistency to Christ who speaks to the Father in our defense and find our acceptance there. It is proper to have our faith examined (something which John's letter will continually do) and even be willing to find it spurious, but we must not do the examining apart from the assurance of the cross or from the call to go to Christ if we decide our faith was not genuine after all.

2. *According to verses 3-5, what is involved in knowing God?*

Christians throughout the centuries have stated the truth that the knowledge of God is the true end of man. But anyone who understands God's word knows that this knowledge means more than merely the contemplation of God's essence or even solitary communion with God. While these things are included, true knowledge of God means something more. It means heeding his call by obeying him.

3. *Why are personal knowledge and personal acknowledgement of God's character essential elements of knowing him? Why is it crucial to understand this and what are the consequences if one does not?*

Knowledge of God includes the acknowledgement of God, who he is and how we are to respond to him. This occurs in every aspect of our lives through gratitude and obedience to God's commands. God's word through the prophet Jeremiah is particularly helpful in driving this point home. In Jeremiah 22:16, while

speaking of King Josiah to his Son King Shallum, God says, “He defended the cause of the poor and the needy, and so all went well. Is this what it means to know me?” We don’t usually think of obedience to someone as being an aspect of knowing them (and rightfully so), but we can’t speak of knowing God apart from such obedience. Knowing another person does not by necessity include obedience to him or her. In the case of God who is truth, who always does what is right, just, holy, loving and kind, and who always desires the same, to claim to know him does by necessity include obedience. To claim to know him who created all things and knows what is good and true is by very nature to agree to his assessment of all things, to be brought under his sway in all things and then to live in accordance of his will. If God cares about the poor, then to know and acknowledge him will mean that you too will care about the poor. If God finds sexual immorality destructive to our humanity, then we too will acknowledge its destructiveness and refrain from it.

4. *What do you think John means when he says the person who obeys God has God's love “made complete” in him or her? What is he trying to emphasize, and why is it important to have God's love “made complete” in you?*

To have God's love “made complete” in us means we experience that love in its fullness. It is not something you merely know about, or about which you are even assured. To be made complete in his love is to be experiencing it. Apart from obedient living it is rarely experienced, but with obedient living, it is something God promises us. Caution your group to avoid the misconception that God’s love is all about warm, fuzzy feelings, however. Sometimes, God’s love is made manifest in our trials – he loves us enough to discipline and grow us.

The reason it is important to be “made complete” in God’s love is that we were built for it, and to shortchange ourselves of his love means that we will not enjoy him to the degree that he offers himself to us. We must do away with misconceptions about the abundant life. It actually has very little to do with circumstances or even happiness. People can be said to have abundant lives to the extent that they know God’s love “made complete” and are tasting it. Even in the midst of difficult and painful circumstances, they are both able to rejoice in that love and live to serve others.

5. *What command is John writing about in verse 7? How can it be new and old at the same time? What gives the commandment a sense of newness since Christ’s coming?*

The commandment of which John is speaking is the command to love. He goes on to mention it in verse 10. In Jesus Christ’s birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension we have the highest expression of sacrificial love that we will ever see. Therefore, though the command has always been in force, with Christ's coming it has such a luster, shine, brilliance, and glory about it that it is difficult to call it anything but new. It was a love demonstrated to enemies to turn them into friends, and to restore to them the glory of their humanity.

6. *How would you define ‘love’ and ‘hate’? Can you think of someone in your life who has the ability to love with particular skill? What are some specific ways in which this gift has been manifested towards you or others?*

J.I. Packer said, “love is both the desire and effort to make another person great.” ‘Great’ in that context must be interpreted Biblically, meaning it is the desire and effort to make the other person everything God intends for him or her to be. M. Scot Peck says, “The will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing... another’s spiritual growth. Love is not primarily a feeling by which we are overwhelmed. The

desire to love is not itself love. Instead, love is as love does. Love is an act of the will - namely both an intention and an action.” You might read these definitions aloud to get people’s reactions. Encourage people to share from their own lives.

7. *Why would love for our brothers serve as a test of being in the light?*

Love of our neighbors is proof of our love of God. It is one of the ways we love God. Such a love will be a visible love and serves as a test of authentic faith - It is a way that invisible love to an invisible God becomes visible. To claim to love God without loving one’s brother, whom God himself loves, is a spurious claim. Since to hate or act indifferently to your brother is a failure to acknowledge God at the most basic core of who he is, it indicates one’s claim to know God as false. You may wish to initiate a discussion about performing loving acts for sinful motives, like securing the approval of people, rather than the pure motive of serving God. Are such acts evidence of being in the light?

8. *How would verses 12-14 have been encouraging, and why would these kinds of words be particularly appropriate following on the heels of what John has already said? What does his differentiation between groups tell us about how we are to care for people?*

Having called people to such a high standard in the previous verse, it becomes extremely important that John take time to encourage those to whom he is writing. To those who are young in the faith, he reminds of the thing we so easily forget - that our sins are forgiven - that we don't have to earn our acceptance with God, and we can cease striving to do so. This is especially important when one is new in the faith, because certain sin patterns may be so deeply ingrained that one fails numerous times before experiencing some measure of victory. They have come to know God as father and so they strive not so that God might be their father, but out of gratitude that he has made them his children. They are reminded to live life out of His first love for them. His words to the fathers - those with some maturity in the community - serve as a reminder that in their counselor roles, they can be confident because they know God, who has created all things with wisdom and will grant them the wisdom they need. Finally, his words to the young men - those who especially struggle with their passions - are that since Christ overcame the evil one, they don't have to give in to temptation. As strong as their desires may seem, he assures them that “greater is he that is in you than he who is in the world.” God has given them the resources to withstand the evil one and they can avail themselves of those resources. These verses remind us not only that encouragement is one of the most important roles we can play in one another’s lives as we seek to grow in godly maturity, but also that what is encouraging and most helpful to one person is not necessarily as helpful for someone else. We need to care for one other as individuals.

Individual Study

READ 1 John 2:3-2:14

1. In a sentence, what would you say is John's over-arching concern in this passage, and how is it related to the preceding passage?
2. According to verses 3-5 what is involved in knowing God? How does this essential element of knowing God differ from what is usually involved in knowing a person?

READ Jeremiah 22:1-17

1. For what kinds of things are Shallum, King of Judah, and the peoples of the Southern Kingdom chastised? Of which offenses are they guilty?
2. Of Shallum's Father, King Josiah, God says, "He defended the cause of the poor and the needy, and so all went well. Is this what it means to know me?" What does this statement tell us about what it means to know God?
3. How does it differ from common conceptions people often have about what is involved in knowing God?

READ 1 John 2:3-2:14

1. John claims that if we truly know God we will "walk as Jesus did." What things do you think John might have had in mind when he made that statement?
2. What things would you say characterized Jesus' life in both attitude and action?
3. Practically speaking, what does it mean to "walk as Jesus walked?"

READ John 15:9-17

1. In verse 12, Jesus says, "Love each other as I have loved you." What characterized and set apart the love that Jesus demonstrated to people that we in turn are called to show to others? Practically speaking, what does it mean "to lay down one's life for one's friends?"
2. Where and how does one get the ability and strength to love this way? What regular, ongoing disciplines are necessary in order to love in the way that Jesus Christ commands?

Lesson 3: *Opposing forces in the Battle*

Think of some people in your life who have influenced you most. In what ways have they shaped you? Why were they able to be so influential?

READ 1John 2:15-2:27

1. How does John's discussion of the world and antichrists fit into what he has talked about so far, and how are these subjects related to each other?
2. According to these verses, what do you think John means by "the world?" What things do you think are sometimes wrongly included in that term?
3. What does it mean to "love not the world?" In what ways does God love, and not love, the world? How does this principle of "being in the world, but not of it" manifest itself in Jesus' life? What are the consequences if we don't have a right understanding of this principle?
4. What is it about the world that makes it so alluring and attractive to us? What are the motivations John gives us to refrain from loving the world improperly? How does one keep these motivations at the center of one's heart and mind?
5. According to verses 18-27, what characterizes the antichrist and antichrists? What is the central evil action in which they are engaged?
6. What is the heresy these antichrists are spreading? Why is the spread of heresy, and this one in particular, considered to be such a diabolical thing? Why does John care so much about heresy and we care so little about it? What effect does it have on people's lives?
7. What does verse 19 tell us about those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ, but later deny him? What does it tell us about their salvation - were they once saved and then lost their salvation? Or were they never saved in the first place? How should it affect the way we live?
8. What are the two resources we have to prevent us from being led astray? To what do each of those things refer, and how do we maintain them in our lives?
9. This passage reminds us that the Christian life is a battle from beginning to end and that there *will always* be opposition. What difference does it make in our lives to grasp hold of this truth? Why is it important to know this? What other biblical truths can encourage us in the ongoing conflict which is part and parcel of the Christian life?

Leader Notes: 1 John 2:15-2:27

MAIN POINTS: In the first chapter, John has told us that fellowship with God and with other believers is the reason we were created, and that our sin breaks that fellowship. Consequently, we should take our sin with great seriousness and avoid a sinful life at all costs, repenting early and often! In the first half of chapter two, he offers some tests to determine whether we are walking in fellowship with God and truly know him. He encourages us that God is at work in our lives, and enables us to walk in fellowship. In the second half of chapter two, John warns believers about two agents which may lead them into sin: the world and the antichrist. We must learn how to deal correctly with these elements, lest our fellowship with God be regularly broken. He describes the characteristics of both the world and the antichrist so his readers may be on guard and able to defend ourselves against the onslaughts of these two forces.

COMMENTARY ON PASSAGE AND NOTES ON THE QUESTIONS:

1. *How does John's discussion of the world and antichrists fit into what he has talked about so far, and how are these subjects related to each other?*

See MAIN POINTS section above.

2. *According to these verses, what do you think John means by "the world?" What things do you think are sometimes wrongly included in that term?*

Many people believe the Biblical understanding of 'the world' refers to the material earth. This is not how the Bible measures the world. The Scriptures are clear that the earth is the Lord's and that it is good. It has been given to us to enjoy. Good relationships, laughter, beauty, music, work, good food and drink are all gifts from God meant for our pleasure, sustenance and enjoyment. In this sense, Christianity is world-affirming. When Biblical writers speak of the world negatively, they mean the world as it has been perverted and serves as opposition to the believer. This pejorative outlook refers to the world of untamed desire and arrogance, including all anti-Christian structures, methods, goals and ideologies. People are 'worldly' when they operate by standards solidly opposed to God's. 'Worldliness' is apparent whenever we take the good things of God and use them in ways he never intended them to be used. It is this misuse that John has in mind when he speaks of the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does. The problem of worldliness occurs when we don't receive God's gifts with thanksgiving and enjoy them in the context he intended. If the gift of wine is used for drunkenness, the gift of material objects becomes extravagance, the gift of sexuality used for adultery, the gift of work used to gain power, then we have misused good things to sinful ends. Worldliness does not just take place in Times Square, but in our hearts. In fact, both James and Jesus indict their hearers for the worldliness seen in their prayer lives. Wise Christians will be aware of how subtle and insidious the world can be in its ability to infect them, their thinking and their actions.

3. *What does it mean to “love not the world?” In what ways does God love, and not love, the world? How does this principle of “being in the world, but not of it” manifest itself in Jesus’ life? What are the consequences if we don’t have a right understanding of this principle?*

To ‘love not the world’ is to abhor all purposes, values, and attitudes which are opposed to God. As soon as we assign a level of value to things that God has not assigned, as soon as we take on purposes for our lives that are not in keeping with the purposes which God would have us pursue, whenever we enjoy things outside the context of understanding them as God’s gifts to us and receiving them with thanksgiving, we are loving the world. To ‘love not the world’ is to hate the things God hates and love the things God loves. God loves the world in the sense that his compassion embraces the poor creatures that Satan has enthralled, but he does not condone its materialism or sin. He also loves it in the sense that he delights in his creation and its goodness, and longs to see it restored to its full glory. We are to love the world in the same way. When we look at Jesus, we see that for him to love not the world did not mean that he avoided ‘sinners’ in the community. Instead, he spent so much time with them on their turf that it was said of him, “Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’” The Bible makes clear, however, that while completely mixing with the world, he remained untainted by sin and the world’s ways.

If we fail to have lives marked with the balance that Jesus had regarding being in the world but not of it, we will live distortedly. On the one hand, if we are not in the world appropriately, we will avoid having enjoyable and robust relationships with non-believers through which we might be used to bring about reconciliation between them and God. On the other hand, if our attempts to be in the world fail to avoid being ‘of the world’ and begin to take on its values and purposes, we will be living out synch with the way God made us. Thus, our fellowship with him will be broken, our lives will be joyless, and we will be of little use in reaching people without Christ and transforming our culture.

4. *What is it about the world that makes it so alluring and attractive to us? What are the motivations John gives us to refrain from loving the world improperly? How does one keep these motivations at the center of one’s heart and mind?*

Two motivations are given to prevent us from loving the world. If we adopt the values, purposes, and attitudes of the world, we will not have room for loving God, nor will we experience the one thing for which we were made: the love of God. The second motivation we are given is the reminder that what ever pleasures the world holds out to us will be short lived. “The world and its desires pass away.” Together these truths remind us that it is foolish to take what is an immediate short term pleasure which can only bring bitterness and disappointment in the end, rather than working for that which will satisfy us. We need to remind ourselves that each temptation comes with the lie that we need that thing to make us happy, but once we have taken hold of it, we will always find out that we didn’t want that thing at all. Once we have indulged ourselves, we will realize that our joy is gone, our communion with God is broken and only guilt and disappointment remain. The way we keep these motivations front and center in our lives is to be regularly asking God to give us perspective on how great is his love, and how hollow are the promises of the world. This day-in and day-out process of meditation and reflection on these things will go a long way in keeping ourselves free of the love of the world.

5. *According to verses 18-27, what characterizes the antichrist and antichrists? What is the central evil action in which they are engaged?*

The predominate characteristics of an antichrist is one who has gone astray and seeks to lead others astray through false teaching. It is not an overtly contemptible character which identifies one as an antichrist, but his or her twisting of the truth and propagation of lies. Many other questions may come up about the antichrist in your group, but if you keep to what John is saying in the text, you will get all the information he deems important for his readers to know. If you let people go on too much of a tangent here, you are likely to wind up discussing impractical conjecture and missing John's major point. As always, guide your group back to the text. The essential point of John's teaching is to warn us of influences which could subtly lead us away from God. Regarding the appearance of a specific Antichrist, John seems convinced that there will be such an appearance. However, he does not give much detail, perhaps because even to him, much about the future appearance of the Antichrist remains unclear. He does emphasize that the antichrist has many forerunners who pose great danger to those walking with God.

6. *What is the heresy these antichrists are spreading? Why is the spread of heresy, and this one in particular, considered to be such a diabolical thing? Why does John care so much about heresy and we care so little about it? What effect does it have on people's lives?*

These heretical false teachers are saying that Jesus was not the Christ, that Jesus was not God in the flesh. Essentially, the dominant heresies of the day taught that the material world was evil. According to this theory, God could not be associated with a human body, and therefore Jesus could not be the God-man. However, John knew not only that Jesus was God made man, but also that *unless* he was there could be no salvation. He had to be human so he could serve as a substitute for human beings. He had to be God because only God could pay for an infinite number of sins. If he was not the God-man then there was no salvation, no acceptance, no welcome before God, and no peace for the guilty conscience. We would still be left in a completely despairing and futile position.

While many in our culture would laugh about the idea of a heresy trial, for John and for us as well, it can be no laughing matter. Many believe there is no such thing as objective truth and consider it intolerant to believe any particular faith position could be absolutely true instead of just being true "for you." Truth is truth, whether it be scientific, philosophical or religious. Differences of opinion on what was true was of great concern. To spread false doctrine was, and still is, a great evil. "Why be so intolerant as to call people heretics who engage in some small lies about God? What difference does it make what somebody says about God? Isn't it the way we live that counts?"

Eugene Peterson answers these questions excellently: "Our age has developed a loose geniality about what people say they believe. We are especially tolerant in matters of religion. But much of the vaunted tolerance is only indifference. We don't care because we don't think it matters. My tolerance disappears quickly if a person's belief interferes with my life. I am not tolerant of persons who believe that they have as much right to my possessions as I do and proceed to help themselves. I am not tolerant of businesses that believe that their only obligation is to make a profit and that pollute our environment and deliver poorly made products in the process. And John is not tolerant when people he loves are deceived about God, because he knows that such lies will reduce their lives, impair the vitality of their spirits, imprison them in old guilt, and cripple them with anxieties and fears. That is John's position: a lie about God is a lie about life, and he will not have it. Nothing counts more in the way we live than what we believe about God. A failure to get it right in our minds becomes a failure to get it right in our lives. A wrong idea of God translates into sloppiness and cowardice, fearful minds and sickly emotions. One of the wickedest things we can do is to tell people that God is an angry tyrant, because the person who believes it will defensively avoid him if they can. It is equally wicked to tell others that God is a senile grandfather. The

person who believes it will live carelessly and trivially with no sense of transcendent purpose. It is wicked to tell a person a lie about God because, if we come to believe the wrong things about God, we will think wrong things about ourselves, and we will live meanly or badly. Telling a person a lie about God distorts reality, perverts life and damages all the processes of living.”

This is a powerful paragraph about how important is right belief, and reminds us that if we really love people, we will be concerned that they believe the truth about God. You might read this paragraph to your group and ask for their reactions and how it influences their concern to speak to others about God and the Gospel.

7. *What does verse 19 tell us about those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ, but later deny him? What does it tell us about their salvation - were they once saved and then lost their salvation? Or were they never saved in the first place? How should it affect the way we live?*

John is confirming the truth that “Once saved, always saved,” and that it is impossible to lose your salvation. Practically speaking, we see people who appear to lose their salvation all the time, but John tells us if they walk away, you can rest assured that they were never really saved in the first place, no matter what appearances may have been. One’s presence in the church does not guarantee their perseverance in the faith, but those who truly are saved will persevere to the end. This teaching should prevent us from having false presumptions, and ought to lead to examine ourselves from time to time to test and see if we are truly in the faith. However, it ought not to lead us to anxiety about our salvation, but ought to give us confidence that if God has caused us to trust in Christ, and we have examined ourselves and find indeed that we are trusting in him, that God will keep us. We need not live in fear. God is faithful even in the midst of our fluctuating faithfulness.

8. *What are the two resources we have to prevent us from being led astray? To what do each of those things refer, and how do we maintain them in our lives?*

In our fight to stay in fellowship with God, we have been given the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. If we remain in the Word, regularly reading the Scriptures and maintaining our closeness to God in prayer and obedience, then these two resources will be sufficient to make sure we do not go astray. They serve as preventive medicine against the lure of the world and the false teachings of antichrists. However, if we ignore these things and lose the influence and effect of both the Scriptures and the power of the Spirit, our lives will be in turmoil. This is not to say that we can lose the anointing of the Spirit if we are truly Christians, only that the influence of the Spirit can be greatly diminished. As one theologian said, “Satan can’t knock you off the ship if God has truly put you on it, (i.e. you can’t lose your salvation) but he can break your legs and arms and leave you in the infirmary the whole time so that you don’t enjoy the cruise as it was meant to be enjoyed.”

9. *This passage reminds us that the Christian life is a battle from beginning to end and that there will always be opposition. What difference does it make in our lives to grasp hold of this truth? Why is it important to know this? What other biblical truths can encourage us in the ongoing conflict which is part and parcel of the Christian life?*

Many Christians look for some secret to make their lives easier free from struggles, but no such secret exists. The Christian life is always a battle. If people don't realize this and fruitlessly wait for the fighting to abate, they will either think God is not faithful (since he is not providing an end to the warring), or that they are doing something wrong. Either way, a person will be left continually frustrated. This may lead them to either throw in the towel all together and scrap the Christian faith as unable to deliver what it promises, or they may hold on to their beliefs, but cease striving and give in to despair. Only people who look reality right in the face and realize they are engaged in a life long war against their sin, the world and the devil will live the Christian life with zest. It is in this reality that we apply the Gospel, resting and relishing in Christ's sacrifice. We ought to realize a number of things about the conflicts that we face. First of all, God uses them to change us and transform us. God is concerned more for our holiness than our happiness, because he knows that ultimately, holiness is the high road to happiness. Struggle changes us and serves to prepare us to live with God and dwell with him. Secondly, in the midst of conflict, we ought to realize that the battle belongs to the Lord. He will bring to completion the work he has begun in us. He has promised to give us the necessary strength to withstand the temptation to give if we will come to him in dependence, which is expressed in prayer where we acknowledge that apart from him, we can do nothing, but that we can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens us.

Individual Study

READ 1 John 2:15-2:27

1. John begins the passage talking about the Christian's relationship with the world. What do you think he means by "the world?"
2. We are told in John's gospel that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son," and in this passage, we are told to "love not the world." What does it mean to "love not the world?" In what ways does God love the world and in what ways does he not?
3. How does this principle "being in the world, but not of it" manifest itself in Jesus' life? What are the consequences in our lives if we don't have a right understanding of what it means to "love not the world," and yet to "so love the world?"

READ James 4:1-10

1. What does James tell us about worldliness - what it is, what it stems from, and how it manifests itself in our lives?
2. What solutions does John give for rooting worldliness out of our lives? What area of your own life is in need of this, and what specific steps can you take to remove the affects of the world?

READ 1 John 2:15-27

1. In verses 18-27, what characterizes the antichrist and antichrists? What is the central evil action in which they are engaged?
2. Why is the spread of heresy, and this heresy in particular, considered to be such a diabolical thing to John and other biblical writers? What affect does it have on people's lives?

READ 2 Timothy 4:1-8

1. Paul refers to the Christian life as a fight and a race. Why is this such a good characterization? What consequences arise if we fail to view the Christian life from this perspective?
2. How does Paul maintain his motivation to keep on going in the Christian life, even though the fighting gets intense at times? What truths does he use to spur on his own heart and mind to fight to the end?

Lesson 4: *Our Christian Identity*

From what different sources do we draw our sense of identity and self-worth? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each of these sources in providing identity and self-worth?

READ 1 John 2:28-3:10

1. What truths about Christ's second coming ought to motivate us toward godly and pure living, and how do they motivate us?
2. Would you say you generally think about the second coming as a motivation for living? If not, why not? Why is it to our detriment to think of Christ's return infrequently? What steps can you take to think on it more often, and live in the light of it?
3. Why does John tell us we are adopted children of God with a sense of amazement, wonder, and awe? Do you think on this truth with a sense of amazement?
4. According to J.I. Packer, the richest answer to the question, "What is a Christian?" is, "one who has God for his Father." What things are implied in this truthful understanding about God's relationship to us? What are the positive results when we understand this? Why do we find it so difficult to live in light of this truth?
5. Are we children of God because we behave righteously, or do we behave righteously because we are children of God?
6. John tells us in a very black-and-white terms, that we are either children of God who live righteously or children of Satan who live sinfully. Taking into account John's statement that "anyone who claims to be without sin deceives themselves," how are we to understand his statement in vs. 9: "No one who is born of God will continue to sin?"
7. What does John tell us about the nature of sin, and how does it give insight on your own sin? How does coming to Christ change one's relationship to sin?
8. As one who has been born of God, are there some ways you see the family traits of obedience and love developing in your life? What things or circumstances has God used to bring about those changes?

Leader Notes: 1 John 2:28-3:10

MAIN POINTS: This book is about the fellowship with God that is ours in Jesus Christ. John is eager to exhort us to enjoy this fellowship and not forfeit it to a life of sin and bondage. He has talked about the enemies of that fellowship both within, (our own sin and tendency to deceive ourselves that all is well) and without (the world and antichrists). In this passage, he continues to motivate and encourage us to protect and enjoy that relationship. The encouragement is brought to us by reminders of the second coming of Christ, warning us to keep from sin and walk in godliness as we await his appearance and the corresponding judgement. God has made us his very children, with all the status and privilege that is implied in that relationship, and so may enter into his presence with great confidence and joy. Still, we ought to make sure the evidence of that standing with God is present in our lives.

COMMENTARY ON THE PASSAGE AND NOTES ON THE QUESTIONS:

Entrance Question

This serves as food for thought. Later in the lesson, we establish the truth that our fundamental identity is to be ground on the fact that “God is my loving, heavenly Father, and I am his child.” People obviously get their identity from many things, such as physical appearance, work, success, family background, possessions, etc. The strength (however dubious) of such identities is that for a time, they make us feel good about ourselves, and others respond to them, however faulty they may be. Since they work for a time and our culture responds to them, they are powerful influences. It is difficult not to buy into the belief that they can give us significant identity. All of us are swayed at one time or another to pursue our identities along these lines. The long term consequences, however, are disastrous. As Dick Keyes points out, “a vast economic and media machine semi-consciously enforces the ultimate importance of superficial and degrading morals and models. How is a person to resist this? We are prey to a network of influences that insist that one’s personal worth depends on physical appearance, youthfulness, money, gadgets, and ability to impress people. Even if we are successful in meeting these demands they will destroy us. The person who possesses some of these qualities is *condemned to be valued only in terms of* beauty, money, success which all can be easily lost at some time. The person who has the courage to rebel against them is judged worthless by society. This judgement is a powerful deterrent to rebellion.”

1. *What truths about Christ’s second coming ought to motivate us toward godly and pure living, and how do they motivate us?*

It is impossible to think of the second coming of Christ apart from the judgement of God. Even Christians who are accepted and righteous in Christ ought not to take that event lightly. Every person will stand and give account for everything he or she did while in the Body. We must all give account and we should all live in light of that fact. We will have to answer to God for every choice we make. That ought to cause us to take all our choices in this life seriously, and make us think twice about short term pleasures we enjoy in view of the long term consequences which await us which will make those pleasures sink into insignificance. Our choices ought to be influenced by the fact that what we most long to hear and what will give us the greatest happiness and pleasure is God saying, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” As John says, we want to be confident and unashamed at his appearing.

A second motivating fact connected with Christ’s second coming is the fact that we will be changed and transformed - our redemption will finally be complete, and all the vestiges of sin will be completely thrown off, never to encumber us again. We don’t know everything that this will entail, but we know we will be pure. John stresses this because purity is our final destination and end. It is incongruent to live out of accord with that end. If such purity is God’s ultimate purpose for you, then to live in opposition to

that purpose is foolish. You are working against God. Of course, not only is it foolish, but the lack of purity or the lack of longing for it *serves* to call into question the reality of your salvation. To not find desirous what God most desires for us is not a good state of affairs in which to find oneself.

2. *Would you say you generally think about the second coming as a motivation for living? If not, why not? Why is it to our detriment to think of Christ's return infrequently? What steps can you take to think on it more often, and live in the light of it?*

We tend to live in light of that which is most vivid to us. For most of us most of the time, the here and now is far more vivid to us than anything else. Therefore, the values and opinions of this world and what matters to this world influence us more than God's values and opinions. The judgement of God seems far off and remote and so the consequences in the here and now dominate our minds much more than any later consequences, however more serious they might be. The vividness of the present then is the reason we so seldom think of Christ's return and use it as a motivation for holy living. Dominated as we are in this way, we live more trivially and less seriously, as well as less joyously. How do we reverse this state of affairs? We must make the judgement of God and the return of Christ the most vivid things in our minds and thoughts. This is done in regular meditation and prayer, where we reverse the situation of current affairs being on video and eternal affairs being on audio so that the eternal is put on video and dominates the landscape of our minds and affects all our actions and the temporary recedes into the backdrop as a voice barely audible above the din of God's voice and the realities of which he speaks.

3. *Why does John tell us we are adopted children of God with a sense of amazement, wonder, and awe? Do you think on this truth with a sense of amazement?*

John is concerned that we be as astonished as he is when we think on this truth. The King James Version catches it well when it translates the verse, "Behold! What manner of the love the Father has given unto us..." The word "Behold" is actually in the Greek text. He is saying, "Look! Consider this tremendous thing!" Forget everything on the periphery and focus your attention here if you really want to see something! You are children of God. Does that not amaze you? There are two reasons why we don't share John's amazement: we forget from whence we came and where we are going. We do not realize the privileges of our position. The news that John gives will never amaze us as long as we feel that in some way we deserve that status of children of God. It is only as we understand the truth that by nature, we are objects of God's wrath and deserve only the most severe judgement and condemnation, that wonder and amazement characterize our response. God has no reason to treat us as children. In our fallen state we are his enemies. But he treats us as sons in whom he delights and whom he loves in the same way he loves his Son who was sinless and did nothing but completely please his Father. Until we begin to grasp this, we will never be thrilled by this truth. God takes the initiative in our adoption. He does so not for anything worthwhile which he *sees in* us, but in spite of all of the ugliness, hate, and rebellion which he sees in our hearts. God is in the business of adopting delinquents. The immensity of the privileges and the security of our standing as dearly loved children is something we take up in the next question.

4. *According to J.I. Packer, the richest answer to the question, "What is a Christian?" is, "one who has God for his Father." What things are implied in this truthful understanding about God's relationship to us? What are the positive results when we understand this? Why do we find it so difficult to live in light of this truth?*

Encourage your group to meditate on the what it means to say God is our Father. With enough reflection, your group ought to be able to discuss for an extended period of time. In fact, it is the engagement in this kind of prolonged reflection to which John is calling us when he says, "Behold - Gaze at this." We need to live in that truth if we hope to understand our fundamental identity as believers. It is only with this kind

of meditation that we can combat false truths and make any progress in the Christian life.

What are some of the implications of this relationship? Jesus' references to God as Father in the sermon on the mount provides quite a bit of fuel for this question:

- ◆ “Why do you heap up words and babble like the pagans? Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”
- ◆ “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.”
- ◆ “So do not worry saying, ‘What shall we eat?’, or ‘What shall we drink?’, or ‘what shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows you need them.”

He listens intently to us without losing concentration for even a moment. This being true, though our prayers may be characterized by earnest longing and pleading because of our deep desire for the thing for which we long, they ought not to be characterized by a *trustless* begging or whining which believes that somehow God must be manipulated if we are to receive what we want. He is generous and is eager to give us what we need. Unlike earthly Fathers who may withhold from us what we need and give to us that which may harm us even with the best intentions, God takes great care to give us exactly what is necessary since he is knowledgeable of our needs and will withhold from us those things which he knows will be destructive. As a father's own joy is forever bound up in the happiness of his children, so God's happiness is intimately tied to his children's genuine happiness - it is conditioned upon ours. God gives us the privilege of unlimited access to his throne and the ability to call him with all tenderness, ‘Abba, Father’ knowing that he shares an even greater tenderness for us. Indeed, it ought to be hard for us to get past the ‘Our Father’ in our prayers without falling back in awe at the incredible miracle which he has wrought in making us his sons and daughters. We are God's priority. To each of us he says, “What in my life is more important than you” - and this he says to us even when we are mired in our sin. God goes to great lengths as do earthly adoptive parents, to convince his adopted children that they are part of his family. He is our compassionate Father - faithful in love and care, generous and thoughtful, interested in all we do, respecting our individuality, skillful in training us, wise in guidance, always available, helping us to find ourselves in maturity, integrity and uprightness.

To not think of God in this way means we have an anemic view of him, and it undermines our relationship with him. Our tendency to see God as cold, hard, austere and unable to be pleased are in complete contradiction to how he reveals himself in Christ. Our view of ourselves, our sense of freedom and joy, and our confidence in engaging the world will all be severely affected if we remain suspicious of his fatherly love. We are only suspicious because we don't understand how radically unconditional it is. We view our status as delightful children as alterable and conditional. In our own lives, the love people have shown us has always been conditional. We have had to do something to earn it and make sure it was not withdrawn. When it comes to our relationship with God, we carry over that radical insecurity. We suppose that he is poised to withdraw it from us with the next wrong move. “Why would he act in kindness and be generous toward me?,” we quite naturally say. But though quite natural, it comes from a complete misunderstanding of the cross and its benefits. If we focus on the cross and the indestructibility and irrevocability of the benefits obtained there for those who have received Christ, instead of trying to earn them by our good works, or focusing on all the reasons we don't deserve it, then the way we live will be radically altered. We will move into our world with a confidence and joy that cannot be robbed from us. The conviction of our hearts and the core of our identity will be, “I am God's child and he is my father,” and that will prompt and control your worship and prayers and, indeed, your whole outlook on life.

5. *Are we children of God because we behave righteously, or do we behave righteously because we are children of God?*

Having answered the above question, this question may seem obvious, but you might ask it anyway. It will indicate whether people have assimilated what you have just discussed. In a sentence, the answer is we behave righteously because we are children of God. Righteous behavior flows from our lives on account of God having made us his children by his Spirit. John makes this clear in verse 29 - Righteousness is the fruit of being born of God. When God's Spirit causes us to be born from above and regenerates us, the inevitable result is an obedient lifestyle. Gratitude towards God for making us his children inclines us toward obedient living, rather than living in the fear that unless we are obedient before him he will deny us the *status* of children. This difference in outlooks sets apart the Christian from the non-Christian, the person who understands grace from the moralist.

6. *John tells us in a very black-and-white terms, that we are either children of God who live righteously or children of Satan who live sinfully. Taking into account John's statement that "anyone who claims to be without sin deceives themselves," how are we to understand his statement in vs. 9: "No one who is born of God will continue to sin?"*

The Bible states that not all people are God's children as John is defining that term here. Not all have the rights of access and the privilege of calling him Father, having complete confidence in his goodwill towards them. This may come as a shock to a number of people, but it is the clear teaching of the Bible (see John 8:31-47). That however is not John's main point here and I would not focus on it. His real concern is to make sure false assurance is not being asserted or supported. He wants us to know that if we "keep on sinning" or "continue to sin" it is evidence that we are not God's children. Now, in light of 1 John 1:8-10, this passage cannot mean that we become sinless. What then does it mean? I quote at length from Dallas Willard from his account of a small group studying this passage to show what it can't mean:

"A straightforward reading of this passage seemed to leave this choice: either one is free from sin or one is not a child of God. A very difficult option! But a well known 'saving interpretation' was offered by one of the more sophisticated members of the group. According to it, the form of the Greek verb translated as 'commits' indicates a continuous action. Hence, the *real* meaning had to be that the one who is born of God does not sin all the time or continuously. A short moment of triumph ensued.

But these were bright people, or they would not have been where they were. It was quickly pointed out that even the very ungodly do not *sin all the time*. They have their good moments. How could merely not sinning *continuously* suffice to distinguish the child of God from them? Will the one born of God not sin on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday but sin on Monday, Wednesday and Friday? Couldn't you kill someone every ten years and still meet the condition of not sinning continuously? Maybe even every five years - or every five weeks?

Further, would it not introduce chaos into the New Testament teachings if we were to add 'continuously' in the translation of every present indicative active verb? Experimenting with a few text passages showed it would. But if it is not to be added in every case, why should it be added just in this case -except to relieve the tension between this text and our lives?"

I quoted at length partly to show you what fun a good Bible Study can be, but also to set up the problem. How do we understand the text without inappropriately relieving the tension? I think this way: What John is saying is that real change in our characters ought to be demonstrated. If we are truly children of God, our lives will manifest change in growth in holiness and love. If we don't see growth in godliness (though it may not always take place at the speed we want in the area we want) then we need to take a serious look at the reality of our profession. We might also add that the reason John states his position in such

categorical terms is to confound the false teachers who because of their false beliefs about the nature of salvation were indifferent to sin and denied its gravity. To them and to those whom they were influencing, he was declaring the incompatibility of sin in the Christian.

7. *What does John tell us about the nature of sin, and how does it give insight on your own sin? How does coming to Christ change one's relationship to sin?*

When John says that sin is lawlessness, he removes the ability to treat it lightly and euphemistically as 'temperamental weaknesses' or 'personality problems' on which we might blame on our parents. By stating it the way he does, he drives home the fact that sin is not merely a negative failure but essentially an active rebellion against God's will, and a violation of his holy law. Implied also in the idea of law is the Lawmaker, so when one sins he or she is not merely violating an abstract principle, but the Lawmaker himself. Personally, it never really bothered me to transgress against an abstract principle, but it disturbs me deeply to know that I have offended God, the one who has gone to great lengths to demonstrate his love for me. It is important to understand sin relationally rather than abstractly.

John tells us that Christ "appeared to take away our sins," and "to destroy the devil's work" so both sin's condemnation and its power over us are taken away. We are thus set free to enjoy fellowship with God and to fight against sin. To fail to do either of these is incompatible with being a Christian. Christ forgives it, Christ destroys its power, Christ enables us to see it as a personal assault rather than an abstract snafu.

8. *As one who has been born of God, are there some ways you see the family traits of obedience and love developing in your life? What things or circumstances has God used to bring about those changes?*

This is just a completely practical question which needs no comment, but may both encourage and change people in your group. You may ask this in the group as a whole, or break into smaller groups to discuss it if people are more willing to open up to just a few others.

Individual Study

READ 1 John 2:28-3:10

1. What truths about Christ's second coming ought to motivate us toward godly and pure living, and how do they motivate us?
2. Would you say you generally think about the second coming as a motivation for living? If not, why not? Why is it to our detriment to think of Christ's return infrequently? What steps can you take to think on it more often, and live in the light of it?

READ Matthew 24:36-51

1. As we await Christ's second coming, the primary attributes he expects to see present in our lives are preparedness and faithfulness. How are we to cultivate a preparedness and a readiness for his appearing? In what activities ought we to be engaged?
2. How would you feel if Jesus returned right now? Why? What are some concrete and specific steps you could take to increase your readiness?

READ 1 John 2:28-3:10

1. Why does John tell us we are adopted children of God with a sense of amazement, wonder, and awe? Do you think on this truth with a sense of amazement?
2. According to J.I. Packer, the richest answer to the question, "What is a Christian?" is, "one who has God for his Father." What things are implied in this truthful understanding about God's relationship to us? What are the positive results when we understand this? Why do we find it so difficult to live in light of this truth?

READ Ezekiel 16:1-22

1. In verses 3-14, what do you learn about the nature of God's love? To what extent does he show his love, and how specifically has he demonstrated it? What is Ezekiel trying to get across to us about God and his character?
2. What would God have expected to be their reaction to his love, and what was their reaction? What was their fundamental mistake which led them to disobedience and unfaithfulness? How can we avoid making the same mistakes?

Lesson 5: *Called to Love*

What is our culture's understanding of the definition of love, and how it is expressed in songs and movies? How does our culture's understanding of love affect our relationships, our friendships, our communities, our churches and our society?

READ 1 John 3:11-4:6

1. How would you summarize this passage, especially verses 3:11-24, and how does it tie in to what has come before?
2. In calling us to a life of love, John first gives us an example of hate, in part to help us understand love, and in part to call us to examine ourselves. What does this passage tell us about hate? What is it's object, it's origin, it's provocation, and how does it manifest itself, both overtly and subtly? What does the presence of hate and the absence of love indicate about a person?
3. Using John's words in verses 16-18, how would you define love? Why is Christ's death on the cross the supreme example of love? How can that example help you to love difficult people?
4. C.S. Lewis wrote, "It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital 'H' than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular." What obstacles do we commonly encounter in seeking to love others? What prevents us from practically loving others? Of what truths can you remind yourself and what can you do to minimize this tendency?
5. Privately think of three people in your life who are difficult for you to love. Discuss practical steps can you take to love them better?
6. What has John said up to this point which lead him to address *issues* of our hearts (vs. 19-21)?
7. What is the role of the conscience, and why is it so important to have a clean, restful conscience? How does John say we are to deal with a condemning conscience? Of what truths are we to remind ourselves, and how do these truths specifically help set us free from a condemning conscience?
8. Read verse 23. Why is this such a good summary of the Christian calling?
9. In 4:1-6, John revisits the topic of false teachers. Why is it important to test them? What sets them apart from each other? How is John's discussion helpful in our cultural climate where people tend to believe no one religious conviction is any better than any other?

Leader Notes 1 John 3:11-4:6

MAIN POINTS: In the previous passage, John called believers to examine themselves regarding righteousness. Were they living upright and pure lives and shunning sin? John emphasizes the importance of fruit in the believer's life. As righteous living is evidence that we have been born of God, love for the brethren is evidence that we have passed from death to life. John's concern is that those to whom he is writing have a communion with God which is free and unrestricted. Inevitably, when we apply such tests to ourselves, issues of our conscience's testimony to us arise, so John goes on to address the issue of a condemning conscience which can hinder greatly our fellowship with God. Finally, in an elaboration of what John has said earlier about false teachers (antichrists), he confirms our need to remain unpersuaded by those who deviate from the central truths of the Christian faith.

COMMENTARY ON PASSAGE AND NOTES ON THE QUESTIONS:

Approach Question

Our culture's obsession with love primarily highlights love as a subjective experience. It is defined as a feeling by which we are overwhelmed - a passion which consumes us. It is essentially selfish and self-centered in its character, focusing on 'me' and 'how I feel.' It is pursued as that which will make me happy. The negative consequences of this notion of love are legion. As soon as feelings dissipate (one falls 'out of love') one's sense of obligation to the other (be it a person, a community or a society) ends, and it is left to its own demise. Perhaps this is seen with no greater clarity than in marriage and peoples attitudes towards it.

Traditionally, marriage had the force of lifetime commitment to the other person - to be there for him or her and to be 'for' the spouse no matter what (the commitment being seen most vividly in making vows and being married in the eyes of the state). Such commitment has become increasingly passe under the pretense that it is unromantic to see a marriage license as having something to do with the essence of marriage (in the words of Joni Mitchell - "We don't need no piece of paper from the City Hal/keeping us tried and true.")

Marriage vows which were once a promise of future love are now seen as nothing more than a proclamation of present love. The essence of love is not seen as commitment to sacrifice oneself for another's well being which may or may not be accompanied by feelings of love and warmth (the piece of paper symbolizing one's commitment and making backing out difficult,) but as the feelings of love and warmth themselves (evidenced by the statements people make when they are backing out of their marriages, 'We just aren't in love anymore' or 'The spark is just gone.') Because our obsession is with feeling good rather than being good, our commitment to anything greater than ourselves is avoided and so our families, our friends, our churches, our communities and our society are weakened.

1. *How would you summarize this passage, especially verses 3:11-24, and how does it tie in to what has come before?*

See summary paragraph above.

2. *In calling us to a life of love, John first gives us an example of hate, in part to help us understand love, and in part to call us to examine ourselves. What does this passage tell us about hate? What*

*is it's object, it's origin, it's provocation, and how does it manifest itself, both overtly and subtly?
What does the presence of hate and the absence of love indicate about a person?*

By using the example of Cain and Abel, John is being more specific when addressing issues of hatred. If love is the commitment, action and self-sacrifice necessary to make people great and build them up into everything God intends for them to be, then hate is the desire and action to hurt, tear down and destroy others. Hate is negative, it seeks other people's harm, even to the point of murder. In it's more subtle forms, it can manifest itself as wanting to make others feel inferior, or it may take the shape of just plain indifference. Here, however, John is specifically addressing hate towards Christians, a hatred arising out of jealousy over another's righteousness. Whenever we find ourselves sneering at the righteousness of another (not to be confused with self-righteousness,) we call into question the reality of our new birth. Righteousness in others should not only be the goal for which we work, but ought always to be attractive to us and cause us to rejoice. Just to feel hatred towards another is paramount to murder, *says* John, knowing that we are called to follow not just the letter of the law but it's spirit as well.

On this point, we ought to say that whenever we make Christianity just a matter of outward conformity to the law and not a matter of heart attitude as well, we reduce it's demands just as did the Pharisees. Of course, no matter how warm our feelings towards people, if we do not meet their her needs, we must profess ourselves to be empty of love towards them.

3. *Using John's words in verses 16-18, how would you define love? Why is Christ's death on the cross the supreme example of love? How can that example help you to love difficult people?*

In looking at these verses we can say love is a positive force, seeking another person's good, and leads to activity for her, even to the point of self-sacrifice. What Christ's death particularly stresses is this love can and should be exercised even towards those who are presenting themselves to us as enemies. He died for us even when we were ungodly, rebelling against him, spitting in his face, and spurning his love. If this is true of his love for us, then no matter what another person is doing to us, it pales in comparison next to what we were doing to God when he exercised his supreme act of love towards us. Thus, no action on the part of another can be grounds for our failure to love them and give ourselves to them. This does not mean, however, that we should aid and abet sinful behavior. Sometimes the loving someone means setting boundaries and limits. Love the sinner, not the sin.

Of course, it should go with out saying that if such love is to be shown to our enemies without holding back or reservation, it is to be shown to our friends and acquaintances as well. It is God's example of love for us that serves as the imperative and motivation for self-sacrificial love on our part. However, self-sacrifice must not be construed to mean only large-scale heroic acts. Very rarely will we be called to die for another, but we will often be called to wash the dishes for a roommate, listen on the phone or go to the movies with someone who is lonely, or stick it out and hang in there with a person who may be draining.

4. *C.S. Lewis wrote, “It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital ‘H’ than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular.” What obstacles do we commonly encounter in seeking to love others? What prevents us from practically loving others? Of what truths can you remind yourself and what can you do to minimize this tendency?*

Probably a number of impediments and obstacles to loving others can be mentioned. A common one is our own *selfishness*. If something is going to cause us pain, discomfort or even inconvenience and reduce our own temporary pleasure, then we often avoid it like the plague. Indeed, when we begin to reflect on our own lives with any honesty, we begin to realize that we are all paupers when it comes to loving others. So much of what do which passes as love is done only because it makes us feel better about ourselves and is convenient at the time. Often it does not stem from a heart concern for another’s well being. Relating to this obstacle, but not identical, is our inability to recognize the needs others have. This often stems from laziness and not working at recognizing their needs. We so often fail to ask ourselves, “Just what is going on in this person’s life, and what can I do to encourage him and above all, push him closer to God?” Without this skill of discerning other’s needs (which sometimes merely involves asking them what their needs are,) we will not progress very far in our call to love others. The only way to combat these tendencies is to engage in the kind of specific and regular self-examination recommended in the following question.

5. *Privately think of three people in your life who are difficult for you to love. Discuss practical steps can you take to love them better?*

Obviously, names of individuals should be kept out of the discussion, but you may want to encourage a practical dialogue on the subject. The important thing is that people take time to reflect on it, making plans to take specific actions which may include working on their motives to love others by meditating more fully on the nature of God’s love to them.

6. *What has John said up to this point which lead him to address issues of our hearts (vs. 19-21)?*

Having called us to the high standard of self-sacrificial love, and seeing how short we sometimes fall from this standard, and how poorly we love, our hearts (consciences) may often accuse us of not being Christians. When this happens, we need to know how to respond.

6. *What is the role of the conscience, and why is it so important to have a clean, restful conscience? How does John say we are to deal with a condemning conscience? Of what truths are we to remind ourselves, and how do these truths specifically help set us free from a condemning conscience?*

The heart or conscience shows us where we have gone astray and are guilty, and where we have not and are innocent. It has reference to the law of God and serves as ‘God’s monitor in the soul.’ As a whole, it should be seen as a great gift to us, but like every other faculty of our bodies, it has been affected by the fall. Thus, it will sometimes accuse us falsely, resulting in false guilt, or excuse us inappropriately, resulting in a false sense of innocence. Our consciences call us to account for our love to others. To the extent that we fall short of the call to love others, our consciences will rightly accuse us. For the one who is demonstrating no visible love for his brothers, the conscience will appropriately serve to condemn them, rip away their assurance of salvation, and hopefully push them into trusting Christ. For those who

are Christians, the presence of Christ's love in their lives will serve to keep their consciences from condemning them. This is of paramount importance: to have an accusing and condemning conscience makes joyful Christian living an impossibility. If one is not convinced of her standing before God, she tends to serve him out of cowering fear, rather than out of gratitude. She is not free, but is in bondage, with no confidence that her prayers will be heard and answered favorably. All of this is to be viewed as an unhappy state of affairs. Of course, our works do not determine our standing before God. That standing comes only as the Spirit works in us so that we put our trust in the finished work of Christ. However, a lifestyle of love serves as corroborating evidence that the Spirit has worked in us to do just that. Without such corroborating evidence, our claims must be viewed with some suspicion.

Still, the genuine Christian with a sensitive conscience will sometimes be accused, so John reminds her by way of encouragement that God is greater than her heart. By this he seems to be saying that our consciences are not infallible and may accuse us unjustly. We should, therefore, appeal to God who is greater and more knowledgeable. "He knows all things, including our secret motives and deepest resolves, and it is implied, will be more merciful to us than our own hearts. His omniscience is meant to relieve us, not terrify us." He knows and sees evidence of the new birth in us even when we don't. Essentially, what we are called to do when our consciences condemn us is to put our trust back in him and his acts on our behalf in Christ. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God." (9:14)

8. *Read verse 23. Why is this such a good summary of the Christian calling?*

This verse encompasses both the call for faith, and the expression of that faith in action. If either of these two components is missing, what one is holding is something other than Christianity. A life of good deeds and activism is not a Christian life if one has not put his trust in Jesus Christ. Neither is one a Christian if, though professing belief in Christ, there is no corresponding bid for a Christlike lifestyle.

9. *In 4:1-6, John revisits the topic of false teachers. Why is it important to test them? What sets them apart from each other? How is John's discussion helpful in our cultural climate where people tend to believe no one religious conviction is any better than any other?*

John, who is concerned all throughout this letter about exposing false teachers both through the content of their teaching and their lifestyles, returns again to explicitly address their danger to the Christian. The teachers who are controlled by underlying spirits, either the Spirit of Christ or the spirit of Satan, must be discerned from one another by the Christian if his fellowship with God is not to be jeopardized. There is really no stronger way of contrasting competing religious views of reality. If it comes not from God, it comes from Satan. That is strong language in a culture which values tolerance so deeply. Of course, tolerance is one thing and relativism is another. The former ought to characterize the Christian, the latter must be seen as an extremely dangerous, if not damning, flaw.

Individual Study

READ 1 John 3:11-4:6

1. How would you summarize this passage, especially verses 3:11-24, and how does it tie in to what has come before?
2. In calling us to a life of love, John first gives us an example of hate, in part to help us understand love, and in part to call us to examine ourselves. What does this passage tell us about hate? What is its object, its origin, its provocation, and how does it manifest itself, both overtly and subtly? What does the presence of hate and the absence of love indicate about a person?
3. Using John's words in verses 16-18, how would you define love? Why is Christ's death on the cross the supreme example of love? How can that example help you to love difficult people?

READ James 2:14-26

1. According to James, how are faith and deeds related to one another?
2. John Calvin wrote, "While it is true we are saved by faith alone, the faith that saves is never alone." James would concur. In what areas in your life is faith expressing itself through love?

READ 1 John 3:11-4:6

1. What has John said up to this point which lead him to address *issues* of our hearts (vs. 19-21)?
2. What is the role of the conscience, and why is it so important to have a clean, restful conscience? How does John say we are to deal with a condemning conscience? Of what truths are we to remind ourselves, and how do these truths specifically help set us free from a condemning conscience?

READ 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

1. What is Paul's attitude toward his conscience and why? Would he agree with Jiminey Cricket's belief that one should "always let your conscience be your guide?" How does his attitude toward his conscience affect the way he lives before God?
2. Seeing Paul's attitudes towards his conscience, what do you suppose he would do if his conscience condemned him? How would he act and how would he think if his conscience acquitted him?

Lesson 6: *Something to Rely On*

What truths do you believe are most important for Christians to understand to lead a vital and healthy Christian life? Why?

READ 1 John 4:7-21

1. Many people look at the outward circumstances of their lives to determine whether God loves them. What is the problem with doing that? According to John, how do we really know God loves us?
2. What makes God's gifts of his Son Jesus Christ and his Spirit so precious in proclaiming his love for us? What do they accomplish in our lives?
3. How does being secure in God's love affect the way we view the changing circumstances (sometimes good and sometimes bad) of our lives?
4. In verse 16, John concludes, "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us." What do you understand that to mean? What does it mean to rely on something? How is knowing and relying on God's love manifested in daily living?
5. When John says there is no fear in love, what kind of fear is he talking about? Fear of what? How is it impossible for one to be relying on God's love and to be in fear at the same time?
6. If perfect love drives out fear, why is it that we walk around in guilt and fear so often? What is the remedy to this?
7. What does John say will be the inevitable consequences of knowing God's love in our own lives?
8. What is your reaction to the great privilege and responsibility of being called to make the invisible God visible through a life of love? In which relationships do you most need to work on demonstrating this kind of love?

Leader Notes 1 John 4:7-21

MAIN POINTS: All along, John has been concerned to make certain that our communion with God is flourishing. In this passage, John further expounds on the truth that we are loved by God which is the great necessity if we are to continue to approach God, sinful though we are. He goes to great lengths to convince us of the reality of God's love, as well as suggesting how truly knowing and relying on that love ought to effect our daily thinking and living before God. There are two particular ways in which our lives ought to be affected. First, if we truly know and rely on God's love we should no longer fear the condemning judgement of God. Thus, all obstacles to our fellowship with him should be removed, regardless of how badly we may have fallen from obedience. Secondly, if we truly know and rely on God's love, self-sacrificial love to others will naturally flow from us.

COMMENTARY ON PASSAGE AND NOTES ON THE QUESTIONS:

Approach Question

Another way to ask this question is, "Beyond daily sustenance needs, what is the most critical need that human beings must have fulfilled if they are to function at their best?" Essentially, this is the same question, except that it is devoid of Christian lingo. In response, it is interesting to note what philosopher and psychologist Abraham Maslow concluded from his studies. After people had their daily needs for food and clothing sufficiently met, the most critical needs human beings have to be happy is a sense of belonging, acceptance and security. A deep understanding of *God's* love provides this sense of belonging, acceptance and security. The rest of the Christian life flows from this.

1. *Many people look at the outward circumstances of their lives to determine whether God loves them. What is the problem with doing that? According to John, how do we really know God loves us?*

The problem with basing your understanding of God's love for you on the circumstances of your life, apart from the fact that God forbids it, is that circumstances fluctuate more often than the seasons. Christianity offers no assurances that your life will not at times be filled with tremendous difficulties and disappointments. Many, if not most people, attribute an understanding of God with circumstances. They say, "God must not love me because... My business isn't prospering... I'm still not married... My marriage is terrible... I haven't been able to get a job, etc." God's love is seen as fluctuating wildly. There is no security in that. However, what John says implicitly in this passage is that it is not by our outer circumstances or by our emotions that we determine whether God loves us. In essence he says, "Don't look there. Appearances and feelings can be deceiving. Look instead on two irrevocable gifts of God: He has given us his Son (vs. 9,10,14) and he has given us his Spirit (vs. 13). According to John, there is no other irrefutable and infallible evidence of his love: "This is how God showed his love among us." It is in realizing that he has given you his Son and his Spirit that you are made certain of his love. Good circumstances are no guarantee of his love just as troubles are no guarantee of his displeasure. When you are tempted to look at your circumstances and draw the conclusion, "God doesn't care about or love me," you must fix your eyes instead on these two gifts and find yourself lost in wonder that anyone could be so lavish and generous towards you. No other piece of evidence can be strong enough to overthrow the testimony of these.

2. *What makes God's gifts of his Son Jesus Christ and his Spirit so precious in proclaiming his love*

for us? What do they accomplish in our lives?

Essentially, these gifts are so precious in proclaiming his love for us because they meet us at our most critical needs. If God has met me at the level of my most critical needs at great cost to himself, then I can certainly trust that he still has my best interests at heart, regardless of the outward circumstances of my life. This is exactly Paul's point in Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" He is committed to our happiness. We are called to trust that.

How do these gifts meet our most critical needs? First, in sending Jesus Christ as the atoning sacrifice for sin, he brings us back into relationship with God. Jesus Christ's death brings an end both to the condemning power of sin, and also the influential power of sin. Through Christ's death we are granted both undeserved forgiveness and also strength to walk in obedience to God. It is probably worth saying that our gratitude and astonishment at the gift of the Son is directly related to the depth of our understanding regarding the *seriousness* of sin. To the extent you lessen the *seriousness* of sin and its effect on us, (it rendered us dead to God, unable to respond to him, under the full fury of his wrath, and made us his enemies) you will lessen the magnitude of *God's* love. It is in dealing with our sin problem that God's compassion is most clearly displayed. For example: If you have a debt of five dollars canceled, you might say, "thanks." If you have a debt of five hundred dollars canceled, knowing that it cost the individual something, you almost certainly will say, "thank you," and also send a note of appreciation. If someone cancels a debt of five million dollars, you will most certainly make a fool of yourself trying to express your gratitude for such generosity. This explains Mary's behavior when she poured perfume and tears on *Jesus* feet and wiped them off with her hair. Jesus' subsequent comment, "She loves much, because she has been forgiven much."

The gift of the Spirit is crucial, because he turns and keeps our hearts towards God. The first manifestation of this turning is seen when we acknowledge that Jesus is the son of God. We know we have the gift of the Spirit not by some subjective experience, but by the fact that we are able to confess that Jesus is the Christ. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit does not subjectively communicate God's love to us (as in Romans 5, "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us,") but this is not primarily what John has in mind in what he is writing.

3. *How does being secure in God's love affect the way we view the changing circumstances (sometimes good and sometimes bad) of our lives?*

God's love helps us to maintain perspective on our circumstances. These two gifts securely affirm that he loves us and is *for* us. They are two anchors onto which anyone can hold despite any seemingly contrary evidence. This is not to deny that genuinely painful things can be present in our lives and often are, only that they can not be the basis for the conclusion, "God does not love."

4. *In verse 16, John concludes, "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us." What do you understand that to mean? What does it mean to rely on something? How is knowing and relying on God's love manifested in daily living?*

This is among one of the richest verses in the Bible. To know God's love and to rely on it means you understand it both in your mind and in your heart, and consequently you depend upon it. Once you truly understand God's love, (though it is so awesome, we never fully comprehend it this side of heaven) you begin to rely upon it. Nothing will move it or change it, neither the weight of your disobedience or your struggles with sin can cause God's love to waver or falter. He loved us while we were sinners. Therefore,

it does not make sense that he would stop loving us because we are still sinners. To be sure, we can displease him and find ourselves chastised in the same way that an earthly father might chastise the child he loves. Our subjective experience of his love may lessen. But his love for us remains unmoved. It does not decrease, nor does it increase. How could it? He already loves us with every fiber of his being. J.I. Packer writes, “*‘God is love’ is the complete truth about God so far as the Christian is concerned. Every single thing that happens to him/her expresses God’s love to him/her. God is love to him - holy, omnipotent love - at every moment and in every event of every day’s life. Even when he cannot see the why and the wherefore of God’s dealings, he knows that there is love in and behind them, and so he can rejoice always, even when, humanly speaking, things are going wrong. He knows that the true story of his life, when known will prove to be, as the hymn says, ‘mercy from first to last’ - and he is content.*” This kind of understanding of God’s love is necessary for living a healthy Christian life. Any lesser understanding leaves us impoverished, weak and in less than the best state of affairs.”

5. *When John says there is no fear in love, what kind of fear is he talking about? Fear of what? How is it impossible for one to be relying on God's love and to be in fear at the same time?*

John is referring specifically to the fear of God’s final judgement and the final rejection that will accompany judgement if one has not put his trust in Jesus Christ. When one has understood God’s perfect unwavering love and has entered into that mutually loving relationship, there is no room for fear. Fear has to do with punishment, says John. Those who cower in fear before God - who suspect that any moment he might reject them - demonstrate they not only mistrust God’s love, but also that they really do not understand it. They fail to see how great the gift of the Son really is, that through his death, past, present and future sins have been forgiven and one’s *status as* God’s child has been secured and cannot be revoked. The Christian who truly understands God’s love crawls into his fatherly lap unafraid.

6. *If perfect love drives out fear, why is it that we walk around in guilt and fear so often? What is the remedy to this?*

Because so many are plagued with this problem, this question is asked explicitly to draw out further some of the things mentioned above. Basically, we walk around in guilt and fear because we don’t understand the complete acceptance and security that Christ’s death and resurrection have achieved for us. Our understanding of God’s love in Christ is shallow and superficial. The way with this problem is through growth in knowledge of the height, width, length and depth of God’s love (Ephesians 3:18). Meditate on that love and bask in it, focusing on it not as an abstract concept, but on the concrete things which God’s love has achieved through Jesus Christ, and the concrete ways in which that love has been displayed in Jesus Christ. We have spoken of many of these in the previous studies in 1st John.

7. *What does John say will be the inevitable consequences of knowing God’s love in our own lives?*

The one who knows and relies on God’s love will inevitably love others, particularly brothers and sisters whom God loves. “We love because he first loved us.” We do not love in order to be loved by God, but because he has loved us. We make the love of the invisible God visible in and through our actions. John is confident that those who are living in God’s love will have loving lives themselves. It is only natural. If this is not the case, then our profession of faith must be called into question and certainly our claim to be enjoying God’s fellowship must be seen to be spurious.

8. *What is your reaction to the great privilege and responsibility of being called to make the*

invisible God visible through a life of love? In which relationships do you most need to work on demonstrating this kind of love?

A purely practical question. The first part can certainly be reflected upon and answered in the group. The second part might be answered in the larger group (where you might not get any response), or answered in smaller groupings and certainly should be used for private reflection.

Individual Study

READ 1 John 4:7-21

1. Many people look at the outward circumstances of their lives to determine whether God loves them. What is the problem with doing that? According to John, how do we really know God loves us?
2. In verse 16, John concludes, "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us." What do you understand that to mean? What does it mean to rely on something? How is knowing and relying on God's love manifested in daily living?

READ Genesis 45:1-15 & Genesis 50:15-21

1. Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers. After he rose to a position of stature was then thrown into jail for years after being unjustly accused of assaulting Potiphar's wife before eventually becoming prime minister of Egypt. Basing his evaluation on his circumstances, Joseph could have easily concluded that God did not love him or care about him. In looking at both these passages, what were his conclusions instead? How can the whole account of Joseph's life help you in your response to adverse circumstances in your life?
2. One writer has said, *"'God is love' is the complete truth about God so far as the Christian is concerned. Every single thing that happens to him/her expresses God's love to him/her. God is love to him - holy, omnipotent love - at every moment and in every event of every day's life. Even when he cannot see the why and the wherefore of God's dealings, he knows that there is love in and behind them, and so he can rejoice always, even when, humanly speaking, things are going wrong. He knows that the true story of his life, when known will prove to be, as the hymn says, 'mercy from first to last' - and he is content."* What is your reaction to this? Take time to ask God to give you the faith to hold this truth deep in your heart so that contentment might characterize your life.

READ 1 John 4:7-21

1. When John says there is no fear in love, what kind of fear is he talking about? Fear of what? How is it impossible for one to be relying on God's love and to be in fear at the same time?
2. If perfect love drives out fear, why is it that we walk around in guilt and fear so often? What is the remedy to this?

READ Psalm 33

1. Twice in this psalm a positive reference is made to fearing God (vv. 8 and 18). How do you reconcile these references to fear and John's statement that perfect love drives out fear? To what kind of fear is the psalmist referring?

Why is important to keep this reverence, awe and respect while driving out the fear of rejection and condemning judgement? What kind of difference would it make in your life if you had this kind of positive fear? What are the consequences if you do not? How do you cultivate this positive fear?

Lesson 7- Assurance that we belong to God

READ 1 John 5:1-21

1. What does it mean “to be born of God?” In the first two verses, what ‘tests’ does John give us to determine whether we are born of God? How are the results of the new birth inextricably related and connected to one another?
2. John tells us the commands of God are not burdensome. What does he mean by that? Do you find this to be true in your life?
3. In an earlier study, we discovered when John speaks of ‘the world,’ he is referring to humankind in opposition to God and his ways. With that in mind, what does John mean when he speaks of us as overcoming the world? How would the life of one who ‘overcomes the world’ look?
4. In verses 6-12, ‘water’ refers to Jesus’ baptism and ‘blood’ to his death. What point is John trying to make and how does he make it?
5. Verse 13 serves as a summary of the book. In looking back over the book, what are the things which assure us we have eternal life?
6. Assurance of acceptance by God lead to confidence in prayer. According to John, how can we be assured that our prayers will be answered? What are the conditions given, and how do we go about cultivating in ourselves the ability to meet those conditions?
7. Verses 16-17 provide an illustration of the kind of prayer that can be made with confidence. In light of this passage and the entire book, what and for whom should we be praying? In light of what we have discovered in this book, what might be the sin which leads to death?
8. In verses 18-20, John begins to close the book with a flurry of encouraging truths and promises. What are they? Which do you find the most encouraging and why?
9. In the final verse John writes, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” What is an idol? How do you go about discovering your main idols? In light of John’s message in this book, was is this exhortation a particularly appropriate way to bring the book to a close?
10. What is the most important thing you will personally take away after studying this book?

Leader Notes: 1 John 5:1-21

MAIN POINTS: In this passage, John repeats much of what he has said elsewhere in the letter, though usually from a slightly different perspective. Due to the repetitive nature of the material, and also because he is bringing his letter to a conclusion, this passage tends to jump from topic to topic. Still, everything he *says* does help to communicate what has been his main concern throughout the letter, namely, that we be assured of our accepted status by God, and that we are enjoying the fullness of being his children.

COMMENTARY ON THE PASSAGE AND NOTES ON THE QUESTIONS:

1. *What does it mean “to be born of God?” In the first two verses, what ‘tests’ does John give us to determine whether we are born of God? How are the results of the new birth inextricably related and connected to one another?*

Being labeled ‘born again’ tends to be a pejorative phrase in our culture, often referring to a certain segment of Christians who are seen as unbalanced, naive, semi-literate, intolerant, sometimes self-righteous religious fanatics. In my estimate, this stereotype makes the phrase less than helpful in communicating to those outside the church. However, even if the phrase proves unhelpful in our culture, the concept which underlies it is exceedingly important and crucial to one’s understanding of the true nature of Christianity. To be ‘born of God’ (which is John’s phrase for being born-again) means that God has quickened your heart so you are awakened to his presence. He has given you a desire to love and serve him, rather than hating him (however covert the hatred may be) and rebelling against him. Rather than referring to a movement within Christianity, it is Christianity. Whether a person uses a label like ‘born again’ or not is irrelevant.

The outward marks of those born from above are belief in Jesus as the Messiah, love for others, and obedience to God’s commands. If all three are not present, the claim to be born of God must be viewed with suspicion. In terms of the relationship between these objective marks, it must be evident from what John has said that confession of Jesus as the Christ is foundational, and that claims to be alive to God without that confession must be seen as categorically false. The secondary characteristics of a life of love and a life of obedience, which are also direct results of being made alive to God, must be present, but they must play a slightly secondary role. While they are important, they are also necessarily imperfect in their display, because we are fallen. In the world, what you actually believe is seen as relatively unimportant as long as you are a loving, generous person. John declares that what you believe is of great and determinative importance. If a man or a woman does not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, he or she cannot have been born of God and cannot be called a Christian. Still all the marks are indispensable: Faith that does not lead to love is meaningless and love that is not based on faith is powerless.

2. *John tells us the commands of God are not burdensome. What does he mean by that? Do you find this to be true in your life?*

If people obey God’s commands because of fear that they will be rejected, punished, or have God’s love withdrawn if they do not obey, then obedience is very burdensome indeed. That is coerced obedience, obedience under pressure. The Christian life under this motivation becomes performance-centered rather than acceptance-centered. Acceptance-centered obedience comes from knowing that we have already been accepted, rather than obeying to be accepted. It is grace motivated and driven rather than fear motivated in driven. We obey because God loves us, not to get him to love us. We seek to please him and

walk in the way of God's commands out of gratitude for what he has done, instead of out of fear of what he might do to us.

A second factor which makes the commands *less* burdensome is the realization that they are not arbitrary, but are intended for our good. They serve as the operating manual for our lives and when we live by them, we are most fulfilled. Also, because God's commands are a reflection of his character, when we live by them we are imitating God and taking on the perfection of his character.

Even though the commands are not burdensome, that does not mean that they are always easy. Because we all have indwelling sin remaining in us, there will often be some struggle in obeying God's commands at times. Still, when we have struggled through and remained obedient, there will always be a joy no matter how difficult the struggle.

If we are to find command keeping less burdensome, we must eradicate fear-driven obedience by preaching the gospel to ourselves. The truth that Jesus Christ has already obtained perfect complete acceptance for us before God that cannot be withdrawn if we have placed our faith and trust in him removes fear. "We love because he first loved us." We must fill ourselves with the understanding that God lavished his love on us while we were still sinners, and allow that love to spill forth in obedient gratitude. Finally, we must remind ourselves that God has nothing but our good in mind and his commands are for our good. Whenever we are obeying God in order to avoid judgement or gain acceptance, or when we are viewing his commands as arbitrary, harmful and stunting to our humanity, then we will find the commands burdensome. When that happens, we must argue against such false thinking to convince ourselves of the truths of God's love, acceptance, and dedication to us.

3. *In an earlier study, we discovered when John speaks of 'the world,' he is referring to humankind in opposition to God and his ways. With that in mind, what does John mean when he speaks of us as overcoming the world? How would the life of one who 'overcomes the world' look?*

Since 'the world' refers to the climate created by sinful humanity which stands in opposition to God and his ways, it has the power to influence us to turn in rebellion against God, his laws and his purposes. To overcome the world means resisting that influence to the extent that we love God wholeheartedly and walk according to his ways and purposes. Essentially, 'overcoming the world' is synonymous with obeying God. There are, of course, in every culture, ways in which rebellion against God is especially expressed and by which we are more likely to be influenced. In your group you might *discuss* what these are at this particular time in our culture, and what obedient lifestyles will look like in distinction to the world around us.

4. *In verses 6-12, 'water' refers to Jesus' baptism and 'blood' to his death. What point is John trying to make and how does he make it?*

Verses 6-12 form an argument which sounds strange to our ears and which is somewhat hard to follow. Still, the basic point is simple enough: "Jesus Christ is who he claims to be - God in the flesh who offered himself as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin that we might be reconciled to God. Therefore believe in him or else forfeit eternal life." What John is doing in this passage is pointing to historical events which prove that Jesus is the Christ. As in a court where one must provide the testimony of two or three witnesses in order to win the case, his evidence or testimonies are the following:

- ◆ Jesus was baptized, and at that baptism the Holy Spirit descended on him and the Father's voice rang out saying, "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased."

- ◆ Jesus was crucified as a sin-bearer and rose from the dead, thereby proving that the sacrifice was complete and acceptable.
- ◆ Having believed on him, God speaks further testimony to our own hearts that Jesus is the Christ who has made us alive. The three pieces of evidence or testimonies together prove beyond a doubt that *Jesus is God in the flesh*, our savior.

For the sake of the group and for practical impact on people's lives, you should probably not spend very much time trying to understand John's argument or speculating on other references to water, blood and the testimony of God. Instead, focus on his main point and its implications. Jesus is the Christ. Choosing to receive or reject this testimony is the most crucial decision a person can make in this life. The question with which we are all faced is this: Have you received this testimony? Your reception or rejection of the evidence is determinative both for your present life, and your future life. A human analogy to this is marriage: When a person is asked, "Are you married?" the answer may be, "yes," or "no," but can hardly be, "I'm not sure!" The same is true for the question, "Do you have life?" Either you have life or for all intents and purposes you have death. If you do not have Jesus Christ, however full your life may seem, it lacks the vital life-giving center, and thus is only a husk without any substance. The life to which John refers has as much to do with the here and now as it does with the future. Eternal life has even more to do with the quality of life (having what really matters and makes life meaningful) than it does with time frame. Eternal life begins now.

5. *Verse 13 serves as a summary of the book. In looking back over the book, what are the things which assure us we have eternal life?*

To enable his readers to respond to the question, "Do you have the Son and with him life?" that every chapter of this epistle has been written. He, of course, wants them to be able to answer in the affirmative and to be secure and assured of their standing before God. What are the tests for determining whether we have life? One writer breaks John's letter down into six tests:

- ◆ Test of consciousness of sin. 1 John 1:8,10
- ◆ Test of obedience. 1 John 2:3-5, 29
- ◆ Test of freedom from habitual sin. 1 John 3:9, 5:18
- ◆ Test of love for other Christians: 1 John 3:14; 4:7-8
- ◆ Test of belief. 1 John 5:1
- ◆ Test of overcoming the world and Satan. 1 John 2:13-14; 5:4

Still, there is some overlap in these tests. One can reduce the tests to three. Assurance can be tested by obedience to God's commands, love for the brethren, and belief that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God.

It might be helpful to point out that while these are tests are a means to assurance, they are not the grounds for assurance. Jesus, the Son of God died for sins and rose from the dead is our only certainty. He is our righteousness, our acceptance, our welcome, our completeness before God. If you confuse the grounds for your assurance of acceptance with the means of assurance for acceptance then you turn the Christian faith back into a performance oriented religion, and lead yourself back into obeying God out of fear and insecurity. To speak theologically, making this mistake confuses your justification with your sanctification. The means of assurance needs to be seen as corroborating evidence that you have genuinely placed your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and your righteousness is a gift of God.

6. *Assurance of acceptance by God lead to confidence in prayer. According to John, how can we be assured that our prayers will be answered? What are the conditions given, and how do we go about cultivating in ourselves the ability to meet those conditions?*

John's concern is not merely that people would be convinced that they have been born from above and accepted by God. However important that is, it is really only a means to an end, that they be enjoying the relationship with the one who has given them new birth and established their acceptance. One of the chief places where that enjoyment is experienced is on our knees. Our assurance of our acceptance has the inevitable consequence of assuring us that he hears us and enjoys our fellowship. Not only do we enjoy the experience of his love when we pray, but we also enjoy talking to him about the needs of the church and the world and the confidence that he too cares about those needs and will respond to our concerns.

John gives two conditions for having assurance in prayer. First, we must believe that God hears us. Such a belief is faith at its most fundamental level. The Writer of Hebrews says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." If a person is shaky in her belief that God hears her, then she must spend time reminding herself of both God's general promises that she is accepted, that he is for her, desiring her good. He calls us to cast our anxieties on him, knowing that he cares for us. Secondly, we must pray according to his will. We grow in this as we spend time reading God's word and finding out what his concerns and purposes are. As we do this, we find his concerns become our concerns. Our priorities in prayer are sometimes far off-base. There ought to be much more kingdom-centered prayer. We spend an inordinate amount of time self-focused on wholly personal concerns involving healing, psychological adjustment and other immediate individual concerns to the point where larger issues closely related to the interests of the Kingdom of God are ignored. In personal requests, begin asking God to reveal his power, beauty and love so we may give him praise and live for him.

7. *Verses 16-17 provide an illustration of the kind of prayer that can be made with confidence. In light of this passage and the entire book, what and for whom should we be praying? In light of what we have discovered in this book, what might be the sin which leads to death?*

We should pray that our brothers and sisters in Christ might be able to throw off everything that inhibits the joy of Christ. John knows if we are able to throw off sin, walk in obedience and love, live in assurance of God's love for us, it will mean joy for us and joy for God. It will increase our effectiveness in the world, and it will mean the advancement of God's kingdom. It makes sense that praying these things for our fellow struggling Christians is one of the most important things for which we can pray. These are the exact things for which Paul prays (see Eph. 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-14, etc.). It certainly also makes sense to pray for those outside a relationship with God that they would be brought into such a relationship and that these above things may be true for them as well.

I would not spend too much time on the second part of this question. It is not unimportant, but it is not as important as many of the other truths which John has been addressing. Spending too much time on the meaning of "the sin that leads to death" will not prove overly fruitful and will take your focus off John's weightier concerns. Our tendency is to get caught up with what is obscure, hard to understand and usually peripheral when studying Scripture and to spend less time on what is clear and central.

What is 'the sin that leads to death?' Judging by what John says throughout the epistle it probably refers to those who having been exposed to truth have deliberately distorted it and callused their hearts. It is this complete overt and rebellious rejection of the truth that John probably has in mind and he most likely would accuse the false teachers who had rejected that Jesus was God come in the flesh of having committed it. Most believe this sin is synonymous with 'the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit' which Jesus talks about in the gospels. One thing you can say with certainty about this sin is that if you are concerned that you might have committed it, then you must certainly have not done so! A person who had hardened their hearts to the truth to this degree would not have enough tenderheartedness before God to even

imagine himself guilty of it.

8. *In verses 18-20, John begins to close the book with a flurry of encouraging truths and promises. What are they? Which do you find the most encouraging and why?*

This question gives you a chance to review truths previously mentioned and delight in them.

9. *In the final verse John writes, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” What is an idol? How do you go about discovering your main idols? In light of John’s message in this book, was is this exhortation a particularly appropriate way to bring the book to a close?*

An idol is anything which occupies the God’s place, anything which drives your life, anything in which you trust to make you happy and determines your behavior. Our hearts are idol factories and we are called to continually rooting out idols. To do this, you must first discern what your idols are. Become utterly ruthless with yourself in asking the questions:

- ♦ “Is there anything besides God which is driving my life, and causes me to do things which are contrary to his commandments, or becomes the false motivation to keep his commandments?”
- ♦ “Is there anything besides God which I believe I must have in order to be happy?”

You must convince yourself that these things, when elevated to a position where they determine your behavior and happiness, are dangerous and destructive to you. They pull you away from God, cause you to see him as *less* than sufficient to meet your needs, and cause you to insult him through disobedience and lack of contentment in him. They jeopardize your life. This not to say that these things, whether they be success, acceptance, a companion, prosperity, or health are inherently bad in and of themselves. They are not, and it is not necessarily bad to desire them. It is only when they are elevated to a place in which they do not belong that they become evil.

Idols are one of the central concerns of Scripture and deserve to be explored more. We are only touching on it here. Still, it is a completely appropriate way for John to draw things to a conclusion. Since idols compete with God for our hearts and make fellowship with God an impossibility, then to exhort us in this way only makes sense. Idols are at the heart of our problems. We must do everything we can to remove them and keep ourselves from them.

10. *What is the most important thing you will personally take away after studying this book?*

Use this time to share with one another what truths have really touched you and how.

Individual Study

READ 1 John 5:1-21

1. John tells us the commands of God are not burdensome. What does he mean by that? Do you find this to be true in your life?
2. In an earlier study, we discovered when John speaks of 'the world,' he is referring to humankind in opposition to God and his ways. With that in mind, what does John mean when he speaks of us as overcoming the world? How would the life of one who 'overcomes the world' look?

READ Titus 2:11-3:8

1. What are the key motivations which Paul lists for striving to obey God, saying no to ungodliness and devoting oneself to doing good? Are these the motivations which drive your obedience? What are other motivations we sometimes have for obeying God? Do you see these other motivations as good or bad? Why?

READ 1 John 5:1-21

1. Verse 13 serves as a summary of the book. In looking back over the book, what are the things which assure us we have eternal life?
2. In verses 18-20 John begins to bring the book to a close with a flurry of encouraging truths and promises. What are these truths and promises? Which do you find the most encouraging and why?
3. In the final verse John writes, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." What is an idol? How do you go about discovering your main idols? In light of John's message in this book, was is this exhortation a particularly appropriate way to bring the book to a close?

READ 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1. To what things does Paul point in the lives of the Thessalonian believers to give him assurance that they belong to God?
2. In verse 9 Paul writes, "They tell how you turned from idols to serve the living and true God." What do you think it means to turn from an idol? What concrete, practical changes would you expect to see in a person who had turned from an idol? How do you see this applying to your life?