

Eighth study - 1 John 4v7 – 5v21

Introduction - Incarnational reality

There are several ways of relating to God. We can learn about him by reading his word the Bible. We can know him by means of dialogue as we talk to him in prayer and listen to him and hear him speaking through his word and through the voice of the Spirit in us or through others. We can experience him touching our feelings and bodies through the Holy Spirit being poured out on us. These things we looked at especially in our previous study. But there is another way of knowing God and this may be called incarnational. It is when we begin to live like God (not perfectly of course but to some degree) so that what we do and say in this world is what he does in and through us. Then he is incarnated in us like an imperfect version of the perfect incarnation, Jesus the Christ, and we understand and know him by being united with him. This is what John writes about especially in the final part of his letter.

Love incarnates in us

In verse 7 John shows that to love our fellow Christian is to express the character of God born in us. The false Christians, the Gnostics were not doing this and this proved they did not have God incarnate in them, v8.

Just to make sure we understand what God's character of love is like John points us to the wonder of THE incarnation, of God giving his Son to die for us, purely by his own initiative when we had done nothing to deserve it, v9, 10. This should be a great example for us which our minds and wills can fix on in order that we may desire to imitate him, v11. In this sense it is like opening a door in our lives. Our minds acknowledge that it is to be desired that we love like God. Our wills open our hearts to God and say "Come Lord and love through me". The miracle of incarnational reality takes place when he does just that, he comes and loves through us.

Verse 12 shows we have knowledge of the invisible God when he expresses his love through us for the very visible Christians around us.

Knowing God through confessing that Jesus is the Son of God

We have already commented on v13 in the previous study that the experiences we have of the Holy Spirit are evidences to us that God lives in us.

We saw earlier that 3v23 is the summary of this letter of John. According to that verse there are two great identifying marks of the true believer:

- 1 He believes in Jesus Christ
- 2 He loves his fellow Christian

So far in this study we have concentrated on the second proof. Now John returns to the first proof in v14, 15. First he states the objective evidence that he has to offer as a witness of the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ. On that basis, which we have in the Bible, he invites us to confess our faith that the man Jesus is truly the divine Son

of God. In so doing we confirm ourselves as children of God and we deny the lie of Gnostic and other false teaching.

This confession of faith is also the basis on which God comes to live in us and we are once again caught up into the mystery of the union of man with God, see the end of v15. As we experience this union so we experience God's love for us, v16.

Freedom from fear of God

God is love, so if we are united to him, our character will be one of love also. A consequence of this is that our experience of love removes our fear of God. Many Christians see God as a vengeful person modeled on the negative experience they have had with their human fathers. Even though they have been forgiven their sins and become children of God, so that the true anger of God against their real sin has been dealt with through the blood of Jesus, they still live in fear because of the projection of a wrong image of their human fathers onto Heavenly Father. V17, 18 show that a real experience of God's love drives out that fear and allows us to be at peace in the arms of our loving Father.

Summary - the story so far

So, just to summarize, John repeats in verses 19-21 that we have loving relationship with God (as the Gnostics claimed to be having), without loving each other, (which is what the Gnostics were not doing). God has commanded us to love our brother v21. There is no escape from this.

Loving the family

In chapter 5v1 John continues with his relentless logic, someone who believes that Jesus is the Christ i.e. that Jesus the man from Nazareth is truly the Messiah, is born of God. This means he is a child of God, one of the family. If we claim to love the head of the family, we must love the members also.

How to love?

Someone may ask "How can I love my fellow Christians, I don't feel much love for them?" John gives a practical answer "obey God's commands" v2, 3. As we follow the teaching in the Bible, made alive to us by the Holy Spirit then we will love our fellow Christians. It is just like if you follow a car that is obeying the speed limit, then you will automatically obey the speed limit itself. If we are obeying God's commands then we are loving. Of course we cannot obey these commands from our hearts without loving God, otherwise we are just being legalistic, but someone who loves God will want to obey his commands, this is not legalism.

My burden is light

Some people might say that it is a very heavy business to obey God's commands, and certainly that is what the Pharisees had made the Jewish law into. But John says that obeying God's law is not a burden, v3. This reminds us of what Jesus said "My yoke is easy and my burden light".

Why is this? Because a real child of God is able to deal with the temptations and pressures that the world throws at us. The way to overcome the world is by faith.

What is the faith that we are to exercise? It is faith that Jesus is the Son of God. A person who has that faith will overcome the world, v4,5 because Jesus lives in him.

Further proofs that Jesus is the Son of God

- 1 The events of his baptism - water v6-8
- 2 The events of his cross - blood v6-8
- 3 The events of Pentecost - Spirit v6-8
- 4 The events in my heart - the inner witness v10
- 5 The events in my life - eternal life v11

The Gnostics accepted the events of his baptism but they denied the events of his cross. Like the Muslims they denied that the real Jesus died on the cross. A true believer who accepts the first two objective evidences written in the Bible will also receive the evidence given by the Spirit sent into the world to convince the world about Jesus, see John 15v26. He will have the Spirit crying with our spirits Daddy, Abba, Rom 8v15,16 and Gal.4v6. He will have the proof of new life, which is what 1 John is all about. In this way he can be sure that he is a true Christian v13.

Fruitfulness in prayer

In 3v19-22 we already saw that if we have confidence in our relationship with God, then, like a child confident in its father's love, we can ask in prayer and receive good things from our Father. We will ask what he is already wanting to do but is waiting for us to ask before he actually does it, v14,15.

One thing we can pray for is for fellow Christians who have gone astray. In the context of 1 John this may mean some of the believers had been deceived by the Gnostics and gone over to their side. John is now encouraging those he is writing to, to pray for them that they will be restored to true Biblical Christian faith. We must also do this if we see someone led into error, v16, 17.

Sometimes the only way for someone to be saved is for them to experience physical suffering, leading even to death, 1 Cor 5v1-5, 1 Tim 1v19,20. In such (hopefully rare) cases, we should not pray for the end of their suffering but that they would turn to God. In the case of Ananias and Sapphira in Act 5 v1-11 the situation was so serious that for the sake of others, death to the sinners was the only solution, as also happened in the church of Corinth through the abuse of the communion, see 1 Cor 11v27-32.

Final conclusion

John's conclusion is expressed in three great statements of what we are sure about based on all he has written.

We know:

1 A true Christian will not willingly keep on sinning. Jesus will help and protect him from Satan, v18.

2 We have a clear identity as Christians and separate from the world, v19.

3 God has really revealed himself to us in human form in Jesus, and has joined us to himself, through Jesus v20.

Any concept of God that is different from this is not the real God but a false god, an idol. The Gnostics were worshipping a mental idol of their own creation. So his final exhortation to his beloved Christian friends was, worship the true God alone not any false version invented by man.

This is also the final challenge to us, to free ourselves from false ideas of what it means to be a Christian. We do this by firstly, accepting the full truth of the incarnation of God in Christ and secondly, not accepting a split between what we say we believe and how we live. If there is such a split then we are not worshipping the "God who is really there", to use Francis Schaeffer's expression but only an invention of our sinful hearts, a mental idol.

As final summary we read again 3v23 "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he has commanded us."