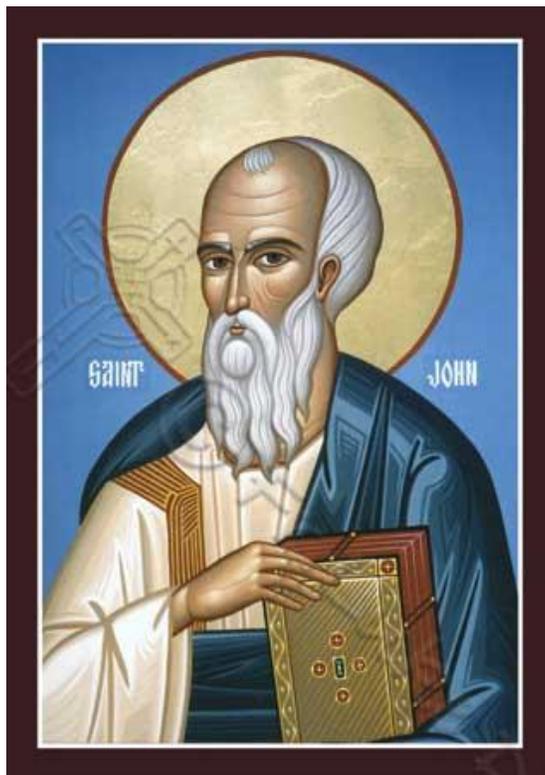


“Bona Fide”

Take Home Bible Study



An Outline of 1 John

Sometime toward the close of the first century, the apostle John wrote a Letter to Christians probably living in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). In this Letter, he used the simplest of language to communicate some of the most profound theology in the Scriptures. John uses simple contrasts, taken from everyday experience, like love and hate, light and darkness, to communicate deep truths about God, the devil, and humanity.

The structure of John is very difficult to discern. New Testament scholars have put forward multiple proposed outlines of John, many of which are radically different from one another. The outline proposed here is based on the observation that John writes in a circular style. He introduces a series of themes, and then he returns to the same themes over and over again. Each time he returns to a theme, he intensifies it by adding information or by making slight modifications. Because of this intensification, it might be better to classify his style as spiral rather than circular. Every revolution around the circle brings an advance. The themes themselves are usually dualistic contrasts, such as light and darkness, love and hate, Christ and antichrists. These contrasts support John's underlying view of the world, which recognizes a cosmic battle underway between God and the devil. The battle is raging, but at the same time we know that Christ has already conquered.

I. Introduction: The Word of Life (1:1–4)

II. Cycle 1 (1:5–2:27)

A. Light and Darkness (1:5–10)

B. Love and Hate (2:1–17)

C. Christ and Antichrists (2:18–27)

III. Cycle 2 (2:28–4:6)

- A. Children of God; Children of the Devil (2:28–3:10)
- B. Love and Murder (3:11–24)
- C. Spirit of God; Spirit of the Antichrist (4:1–6)
- IV. Cycle 3 (4:7–5:12)
 - A. Love and Fear (4:7–21)
 - B. Faith in Jesus the Christ (5:1–12)
- V. Conclusion (5:13–21)
 - A. Prayer and Sin (5:13–18)
 - B. Understanding (5:19–21)

Introduction

Two major themes run throughout John’s Epistle: truth and love. While his opponents refused to confess that Jesus is the Christ or that He came in the flesh, John insists on the truth of God’s concrete actions for our salvation. His opponents felt that they had no sin and were under no obligation to follow God’s Law. However, John stresses the obligation to love our brothers and sisters. John’s opponents, then, had both doctrinal and moral problems. Possibly, John wrote his Letter to counter an early form of a heresy later known as Gnosticism. Gnostics claimed to have a secret knowledge that ordinary Christians lacked. This secret knowledge informed them that the created world was evil, and that what one did with one’s body was therefore unimportant. The recently publicized “Gospel of Judas,” for example, was written by Gnostics.

When John presents the positive truths of Christianity in his Letters, he stresses concretely the physical reality of Christ’s flesh. He also emphasizes our continuing obligation to care for the physical needs of our brothers and sisters. He does not allow the Christian faith to float away into an abstract, spiritual world. Furthermore, John stresses the reality of the cosmic battle that is raging between God and the devil. He tells his readers that they are taking part in this battle. Also, they should ensure that they are on the side of light, love, and Christ, rather than on the side of darkness, hate, and antichrists. For John, there is no middle ground. This lack of middle ground may be troubling to some readers. The entire letter is cast in terms of stark opposites. Consequently, at times John’s description of a Christian sounds as if he or she can expect to achieve perfection in this life. One is either sinful like the devil or holy like God. However, John does not teach this. Already in 1 John 1, he stresses the necessity of the ongoing forgiveness of sins. It may be helpful to think of John describing us more as we will be on the day of Christ’s return rather than as we are now (1 John 3:2). His goal, after all, is that we may have fellowship with God and have eternal life.

April 1st to 8th

Lesson 1- The Word of Life

Unlike philosophy, the Christian faith does not derive truth from human reason. Rather, our faith is based on events that God accomplished in history. These events range from God creating the universe, to His rescue of His people from Egyptian slavery, to His return of His people from Babylonian exile. Yet the culmination of God’s saving acts occurs in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This event is the hinge on which history turns. But how do we have access to events that happened thousands of years before we were born? We cannot observe them for ourselves. We cannot deduce the content of these events by observing the present world around us. The only way we can have knowledge of these events is through the testimony of eyewitnesses. That is what John gives us in his First Epistle. John is an eyewitness; he saw Jesus, touched Him, and heard Him teach. As such, John is in a position to tell us the truth about Him.

Setting the Stage

John wrote his Letter to those he considered his “children” (1 John 5:21). Though it is unclear exactly where these recipients lived, it is clear that John is writing to churches. Tradition locates these churches somewhere in Asia Minor. John’s goal is to proclaim eternal life to his readers so they may have fellowship with him, with the Father, and with Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3). An important part of proclaiming eternal life is refuting false teaching regarding Christ. Much of the Letter is devoted to such refutation. Before he launches into his refutation of error, however, John establishes his credentials as an eyewitness to the word of life.

1. What is the value of eyewitness testimony? In what settings is eyewitness testimony important today?
2. Does the refutation of error make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?

We Have Touched the Word of Life

Read 1 John 1:1–3. Although the term “word of life” is not a particularly common designation in the New Testament, it forms the foundation of the message of 1 John. “Word of life” can mean the word about life, but it can also mean the word that gives life. The second sense is probably what John had foremost in his mind. Jesus is the “Word of life.”

3. What examples from the Gospels can you think of where John or the other disciples saw or touched the Word of life?
4. John uses physical language to describe the Word of life, saying that he has seen, heard, and handled that Word. Imagine how Christianity would be different if the Word had not become flesh (John 1:14). How would this affect our view of
 - a. creation, and especially our own bodies?
 - b. what happened on the cross?
 - c. what we receive in the Lord’s Supper?
 - d. the resurrection on the Last Day?

John’s Opponents

John wrote against an early form of Gnosticism. The word *Gnosticism* comes from the Greek word for “knowledge.” Its adherents claimed to have secret knowledge about God and the universe that no one else had. From 1 John we can piece together some of what John’s opponents taught.

5. What do the following verses imply about the supposed “knowledge” of John’s opponents?

a. 1 John 1:8

b. 1 John 2:4

c. 1 John 2:22

d. 1 John 4:2–3

It may seem strange that John’s opponents claimed to have no sin, yet they did not follow the Commandments. However, this belief is a feature of Gnosticism. Gnostics believed that the physical world was not created good, but was in fact evil. Since they believed physical creation was evil, they denied that Jesus came in the flesh. They also claimed that what they did in their earthly lives did not matter since their bodies were evil.

6. Can you think of any people today who hold any of the positions of John’s opponents?

Fellowship

Review 1 John 1:3. John states that the purpose of his Letter is to create fellowship between him, his reader, the Father, and Jesus Christ. Fellowship (*koinonia* in Greek) is a union, or communion, between Christ and believers, and also between believers.

7. How is this fellowship, or union, concretely expressed in the Divine Service? See 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, and note that the word *participation* is translating the Greek word *koinonia*, the same word John uses for “fellowship” in 1 John 1:3.

8. John says in 1 John 1:4, “We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.” How does fellowship with Christ bring joy to your life? How does fellowship with other Christians also bring joy?

God’s Word for Today

We are in a very different position than John. He was an eyewitness of Jesus’ earthly ministry, and we are not.

9. Why is it sometimes difficult to believe the eyewitness testimony of others? What evidence does John provide to prove that his testimony is credible?

10. Although in a different way, we, too, have heard and touched the Word of Life, our Savior Jesus Christ, in the Gospel and the Sacraments. How does this both inspire and enable you to speak to others about Him as His witness?

In Closing

- Make a list of the physical blessings God has granted you.
- Picture heaven in your mind's eye. In your view of heaven, does God continue to grant you physical blessings in eternity?

Lesson 2 Light and Darkness

Are you afraid of the dark? The contrast between light and darkness evokes deep human emotions regarding safety and fear. Darkness is terrifying because we cannot see. Perhaps we cannot see where we are going or what may be lurking out there to harm us. Light, on the other hand, is comforting because with light we can see. We can perceive and understand the lay of the land, and any dangers out there are made clear.

The contrast between light and darkness also evokes the account of creation in Genesis 1. In the darkness that was over the face of the deep, God said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). God set the sun and the moon in the heavens “to separate the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:18). God’s will for His creation is to have light, to walk in light. Sin, however, contradicts God’s will and plunges the sinner back into darkness. Sin is not merely disobedience; it is a rejection of the Creator and entails a separation from the source of light and life. Therefore, sin ought to be far more terrifying to us than ordinary darkness. How can we live in the light instead of the darkness? John addresses this question in the section we are studying today.

Setting the Stage

John’s Letter employs a series of contrasts that form the titles for most of the units in this study. The first of these is the contrast between light and darkness. John associates darkness with sin, while he associates light with God. Like light and darkness, God and sin cannot go together. That is why the forgiveness of sins is absolutely necessary if humanity is to live in fellowship with God.

11. Why does it feel like we are “in the dark” when we sin against God and His Word? What other feelings do we experience when we willingly and knowingly sin?

12. How do you find relief from the guilt of sin?

God Is Light

Read 1 John 1:5. There are a handful of passages throughout the Bible that explicitly summarize the Christian message. For example, when Jesus summarizes the message of the Scriptures in Luke 24, he says, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations” (Luke 24:46–47). In 1 John 1:5, however, John summarizes the message he wants to communicate to his reader as “God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.”

13. What do you think it means to call God “light”? Is this good news or bad news?

14. Do you think Luke 24:46–47 and 1 John 1:5 are summarizing the same basic message, or are they saying different things? Explain.

Walking in the Light

Read 1 John 1:6–10. “Walking in the light” is another way of saying “being a Christian.” At this point in the text, John provides solid instruction about what a Christian life does and does not look like.

15. Which of these people are “walking in the light” as John describes it in verses 6–10?

- a. Someone who does not sin.
- b. Someone who sins but confesses it.
- c. Someone who sins but denies it.

16. According to 1 John 1:8, what is the consequence of refusing to confess sins?

- a. What is the even more severe consequence mentioned in John 1:10?
- b. If we make God out to be a liar, who are we saying He is like? See John 8:44.

17. There are many areas of life in which Christians confess their sins. In which of the following contexts is it easier for us to confess our sins, and in which is it harder? Why?

- a. In prayer (as in the Lord’s Prayer, for example).
- b. At home to our family members against whom we have sinned.
- c. In church in the general confession.
- d. In private confession with the pastor.

18. What would it take to overcome the barriers to confession that we feel in some of the above contexts?

19. Christ gave the authority to forgive sins to the Church, and that authority is delegated by the congregation to its called pastor. When the pastor pronounces the Absolution he says, “as a called and ordained servant of the Lord and by His authority.....I forgive all you sins.”

- a. Why might such a claim be objectionable to some people? See Mark 2:7.
- b. On what basis then can the pastor claim this authority? See John 20:21–23.
- c. How is it comforting to have a pastor with this authority?

God’s Word for Today

Most religions, and even nonreligious worldviews, have some idea of what people should and should not do, of what it means to walk in the light and to walk in darkness. John, however, gives a uniquely Christian description of these things in the verses we have studied.

20. In what ways do you think Christians today are tempted to “walk in darkness”?

21. In light of the verses we have studied, offer your own description of what it means to “walk in the light.” How is this different from what you may have thought before or from other common views of which you are aware?

In Closing

- Think of the sins that trouble you the most. Read 1 John 2:1 & 2, and memorize verse 1b

April 8th to 15th

Lesson 3 Love and Hate

When asked which commandment was the greatest, Jesus pointed to the commands to love God and our neighbor (Matthew 22:34–40). The entire Law, then, can be summarized in one word: *love* (see Romans 13:8–10). In the verses under our consideration this session, John develops the idea that love is the fulfillment of the Law. In one sense, love is a demand on us. We keep God’s commands by loving God and our neighbor. When we fail to love, we sin. However, love can also refer to God’s love for us. In this sense, love is a sheer gift. God does not love us because He sees something attractive or lovable in us. He loves us because *He* is love, and He gave His Son as the sacrifice to forgive our sins. Both kinds of love are in play in John’s discussion.

Setting the Stage

The status of God’s Law was the subject of much contention in the Church during the first century. Some insisted that Christians had to keep all Old Testament laws in order to be saved. Against this position, Paul taught that God’s Law (summarized by the Ten Commandments) was still good and applicable to the Christian (Romans 7). However, he also taught that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ, not by keeping the Law (Romans 3). Others, like the Gnostics, held that the entire Old Testament was irrelevant to the Christian and that no moral law, much less the Ten Commandments, was binding on the Christian. This is perhaps the position of

John's opponents. At any rate, John's opponents seem to claim they can know God without keeping His Commandments.

22. What are some ways that people today try to know God?

23. Do you think people today understand God's Law to be binding on them?

Jesus, the Propitiation for Our Sins

Read 1 John 2:1–2. John tells his readers that he does not want them to sin, but God has made a provision for them if they do.

24. Jesus is our “advocate with the Father,” which is basically a lawyer for the defense. When Jesus argues your case before the Father, what do you think He says?

25. Jesus is the “propitiation for our sins.” A propitiation is a sacrifice that puts away God's wrath over sin. Do you think this helps someone who is trying to avoid sin or encourages him or her to sin all the more? Explain your answer.

Lying and Telling the Truth

Read 1 John 2:3–6. John stresses the importance of integrity by introducing another contrasting pair of concepts: lying and telling the truth. Lying means your actions do not match what you claim about your relationship to God. Telling the truth means they do.

26. How do you know whether you have come to know God and are in Him?

27. Does this mean that John thinks his readers do not sin? See 1 John 1:10 and 1 John 2:1.

28. When John says that the “love of God” (2:5) is perfected in one who keeps the Commandments, do you think he is referring to our love for God or God's love for us? What difference does it make?

Love: A Command Both Old and New

Read 1 John 2:7–8. John says that he is writing a command that is old and new. This language evokes the “new command” that Jesus gave on Maundy Thursday, that His disciples should love one another.

29. In what sense is the command to love one another an old command? See Leviticus 19:18.

30. In what sense is the command new? See John 13:34–35.

31. How does Jesus change your understanding of what it means to love?

Hate: A Life in Darkness

Read 1 John 2:9–11. In these verses, John further explains the theme of light and darkness, which we explored in the last lesson, by correlating light with love and darkness with hate. Those who hate their brothers stumble because they are in the darkness and cannot see where they are going.

32. Can you think of examples in your life where hate blinded and caused someone to stumble?

33. What is the best way to address hate, either in your own heart or the hearts of others?

Do Not Love the World

Read 1 John 2:15–17. Love is good, but not when directed toward the wrong object. We are to love God and our brother, but not the world or things in the world.

34. When John says, “Do not love the world,” what does he mean by “world”?

35. Does this mean that God’s creation is evil? Why or why not?

God’s Word for Today

John’s polar opposition between light and darkness, love and hate, lying and telling the truth leaves no room for seeing ourselves as partly holy and partly sinful. This may make us uncomfortable if we are accustomed to placing ourselves in some middle position between the two.

36. Do you keep the Commandments? On what basis can you say this?

37. On what basis can you be sure that you know the Father?

In Closing

• Consult a reputable Bible dictionary or other resource to learn more about the word *propitiation*. How does this knowledge help you understand Christ’s death on the cross?

April 15th to 22nd

Lesson 4 Christ and Antichrists

Perhaps no word in the English language conjures up the image of supreme evil more than the word *Antichrist*. In film, the Antichrist is often portrayed as an attractive and powerful figure, who comes into the world to overthrow all that is good and bring the world to destruction. He is not merely a false teacher, in this view, but is actually a child of Satan, often coming into the world in a way that mirrors Jesus' own virgin birth. In order to understand the word *antichrist*, however, we first need to understand the word *Christ*. Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term *Messiah*, which means "the Anointed One." In the Old Testament, God promised that His Anointed One would deliver His people. For instance, Psalm 2 speaks of the kings of the earth conspiring "against the LORD and against His anointed" (v. 2). However, the Lord tells the Anointed One, "You are My Son" (v. 7) and promises that His Son will rule the nations (v. 8). When Jesus was baptized, He was identified as this same Anointed One when the voice from heaven said, "You are My beloved Son" (Mark 1:11). Jesus, then, is the Christ, because God the Father anointed Him with the Holy Spirit at His Baptism to carry out His mission of saving the world. Therefore, *antichrist* simply means one who is opposed to the Christ and therefore to His anointing and mission. As we shall see, there are a number of people who merit this title. The Holy Spirit works through the message the apostles received from Christ. Anyone who opposes this message can be called an antichrist.

Setting the Stage

John warns his readers about the coming of the Antichrist, and indeed of many antichrists. These are people who were associated with the Church but "went out from us" (1 John 2:19). The purpose of this section of John's Epistle is to tell his readers how to recognize antichrists. He also wants to assure them that the truth they have is the ultimate truth, so they do not need to listen to anyone who claims to have more lofty knowledge than what they have already been taught.

38. What comes to your mind when you hear the word *antichrist*?

39. What beliefs do you expect the Antichrist to promote?

The Coming of the Antichrist(s)

Read 1 John 2:18–25. In some places in Scripture, the coming of one Antichrist is predicted. For example, Paul warns of the "man of lawlessness" (2 Thessalonians 2:3–4). John mentions the Antichrist as well, but he

also refers to the coming of many antichrists. Antichrist, then, can refer specifically to the one figure of ultimate evil or generally to anyone who opposes Christ. John focuses on the latter sense.

40. According to these verses, what identifies people as antichrists?

41. How is this description different than the way people normally imagine the antichrist?

The Anointing

Read 1 John 2:20–21, 24–27. Like later Gnostics, John’s opponents seemed to have claimed a secret knowledge, which they believed ordinary Christians lacked. John told his readers that they already had all knowledge because of their anointing by the Holy Spirit. John did not imagine that the Spirit would lead his readers into new, unbiblical truths. He told them, “Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you” (1 John 2:24). The teaching activity of the Spirit cannot be separated from the message John received from Christ and gave to his readers. *Anoint* means to pour oil on someone. In the Old Testament, this action designated someone as a king or a prophet. But one can also be anointed by the Holy Spirit, as Jesus was at His Baptism. John informed his readers that they, too, had been anointed by the Spirit. Early baptismal liturgies often included anointing with oil (called chrismation), along with the baptizing in water, to correspond ritually to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Baptism. Through the coming of the Spirit, the baptismal candidates became, as Luther said, “little Christs.” The antichrists, then, are opposed not only to Jesus and His anointing but also to the Christians and their anointing.

42. John says that his readers have “no need that anyone should teach you” (1 John 2:27). Do you think John understands himself to be teaching his readers? Explain.

43. Do you think John means there should be no teachers at all in the Church?

44. In what sense do you need a teacher?

45. In what sense do you *not* need a teacher?

God’s Word for Today

John addressed a particular problem in the Church of his day: false teachers (antichrists), who were opposing Christ and insisting that they had the true teaching. John directs Christians to have confidence in their own anointing with the Spirit through what they learned from the beginning. How do these things apply to our situation today?

46. Do you recognize any antichrists today? Who are they?

47. If someone claims that he or she is led by the Spirit to a particular belief, how can you discern whether that claim is true?

In Closing

- Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 to gain more information about the Antichrist. How does this compare to John’s presentation of this topic?
- Consult a reputable Bible dictionary or other source to learn about the practice of anointing.

April 22nd to 29th

Lesson 5

Children of God; Children of the Devil

In our verses for today, John appears to operate with the assumption “Like father, like son.” In other words, children tend to behave like their parents. This is true not only in ordinary human families but also in the family of God. Children of God behave like God, and children of the devil behave like the devil. In principle, this means that all the stark contrasts John rehearses in his Letter, such as light/darkness, truth/lie, love/hate, also correspond to the lives of his readers. Those who are children of the devil live lives characterized by darkness, lies, and hate, while those who are children of God live lives of light, truth, and love. John is not saying that the lives of unbelievers are always evil in an obvious way. Certainly, we recognize that unbelievers are often good neighbors, good citizens, and the like. This idea is affirmed in the Scriptures (see Romans 2:14–15). John, however, is speaking of the basic orientation of our lives, which can either be toward God or toward the devil. This orientation is what lies beneath our daily activities.

Setting the Stage

As we saw in the previous lessons, John leaves no room for us to imagine ourselves halfway between sin and holiness: “No one who abides in Him keeps on sinning” (1 John 3:6). Texts like this raise the question of whether we must be perfect in this life in order to be Christians. This question will engage us in the study, but for now we should note that it is no surprise that John describes the Christian life in terms of a stark contrast between sin and holiness since his entire Letter is structured around stark contrasts.

48. Why do you think some Christians believe they can live their lives without sinning? What is attractive about this false belief?

49. How should Christians react to God’s unceasing demand for perfection?

The Father’s Love for Us

Read 1 John 2:28–3:3. In His love for us, God made us His children. This fact transforms our lives. We begin to act like God acts. This not only identifies us as His children, but also it marks us as alien to the world. Just as the antichrists oppose the anointing of Christians because they oppose the anointing of Christ, so also the world does not know Christians because it does not know Christ. John does not suggest that our behavior now measures up to God’s standard of perfection, but he looks forward to the day when Christ will appear. On that

day, what we are now by faith will be fully revealed when “we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2).

50. How do these passages illustrate the principle “Like father, like son”?

51. Even though we are God’s children, the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh still fight against us. How do we see that in our everyday lives? Provide practical examples.

52. What information do these verses give us about the day when Christ will return?

53. Read 1 Corinthians 15:50–57 and describe how we will be changed at Christ’s return.

54. When you think of Christ’s return, are you filled with confidence or shame (1 John 2:28)? Why?

55. How does John say you can become pure?

The End of Sin

Read 1 John 3:4–10. Sin is lawlessness, but Christ came to take away sin. He takes away sin first by offering Himself as a sacrifice to atone for sins (propitiation). He then strengthens God’s children through His Word and Spirit to lead godly lives. Unlike propitiation, which gives us full forgiveness of sins now, Christ’s activity in our lives through our good works is not yet perfect.

56. When John states that no one who keeps on sinning has either seen or known Him, is he saying that Christians never sin? See 1 John 1:10.

57. What is John saying? Note how he phrases it in 1 John 3:4.

58. What is the difference between a Christian who sins and a non-Christian who sins?

God’s Word for Today

John argues strongly that your actions reveal whose child you are. He speaks in absolute contrasts, which will not be fulfilled until the Last Day (see 1 John 3:2–3). Nevertheless, God is at work in our lives now. Because of this, we can draw comfort, not only from God’s promise of forgiveness, but also from His activity in our lives now.

59. What evidence do you see in your life that would identify you as God’s child?

60. What contrary evidence do you see, and what can be done about it?

In Closing

- Review the Ten Commandments (from Luther’s Small Catechism or Exodus 20:1–17) to see the shape of a life lived according to God’s design.
- Read Romans 7:7–25, and reflect on how this description of the Christian life compares and contrasts to the one in 1 John.

April 29th to May 6th

Lesson 6 Love and Murder

Murder—it is one of the most heinous crimes possible. Those who sit on death row have probably committed murder. John, however, does not limit the word *murder* to those who have physically killed someone. He expands the term to include anyone who hates. He is not merely saying that hatred may lead to murder, but he is saying that hatred itself is in some way equivalent to murder. It is true that in the sight of human beings, murder and hatred are not the same. Murder destroys life in a way that hatred does not. Murder carries far greater criminal penalties than hatred. Murder evokes more horror than hatred. One would probably rather live next door to a hater than a murderer. Nevertheless, in the sight of God, hatred is no different than murder. This fundamental insight gives new urgency to the necessity to love. No one wants to live a life entangled and burdened by murder. However, it is no longer possible for people to comfort themselves with the thought that although they may not love as they should, at least they have not committed murder. Although they may not be perfect, at least they are not as bad as a criminal. If the failure to love is tantamount to murder, then love is the only option. There are no excuses. Love is the way of a Christian.

Setting the Stage

In this section, John cycles back around to the theme of love and hate, which we covered in Lesson 3. When John returns to a theme, he not only repeats it, he intensifies it. So here he speaks not merely of hate, but of murder. This is part of a progressive unmasking of sin that John employs throughout his Letter. In 1 John 2:1–11, we saw that anyone who does not keep God’s Commandments is a liar, walks in darkness, and hates his brother. Now John calls such a person a murderer.

61. How would you define love?

62. How would you define hate?

The Example of Cain

Read 1 John 3:11–13. When Cain killed Abel, he became the first murderer, the prototype of all killers throughout history. John raises the example of Cain as a warning to his readers that they should not follow in Cain’s footsteps. John is concerned, however, not only with the outward act of murder, but also with Cain’s inner motivations. If we understand what drove Cain to kill Abel, similar motivations in our own hearts will be unmasked, and we will not so readily follow Cain’s example.

63. Read Genesis 4:1–8. According to Genesis, why did Cain kill Abel?

64. How does John describe the reason Cain killed Abel?

65. What evidence is there in the Genesis account to support John’s explanation?

What Love Looks Like

Read 1 John 3:14–18. Jesus laid down His life for His brothers, willingly handing Himself over to be murdered. This is the ultimate act of love. Paul goes so far as to say that this self-sacrificial attitude is what it means to have the same mind as Christ (Philippians 2:5–8). This is how we know what love looks like. This act of love did not end with Jesus’ death, however. John insists that it opens our hearts and leads us to concrete actions to help those in need.

66. How can we “lay down our lives for the brothers” if we are not being threatened with death?

67. Why do you think John equates hate and murder? See Matthew 5:21–22.

68. People today often think of love primarily as a feeling. What do you think John would say about that?

The Confidence That Love Gives

Read 1 John 3:19–24. In this section, John tells us that our love gives us confidence and reassures our hearts before God. It is easy to see how we can have this confidence once Christ has returned and we are like Him because we see Him as He is (1 John 3:2b). However, as long as “what we will be has not yet appeared” (1 John 3:2a), our love is still corrupted by sin.

69. To what extent does your love reassure your heart before God?

70. What hope does John give to those who are not reassured by it?

71. What do you think John would want you to do if you are not reassured? See 1 John 1:8–9.

God’s Word for Today

John’s discussion of love and murder forces us to think about our lives in ways that perhaps we do not normally think about them. John’s stark contrast between love and murder intensifies our duty to love, and it encourages us to think of Jesus as the model of what love looks like.

72. What did you learn about love and murder today that you did not know before? If you feel comfortable, share your thoughts with the group.

73. What are the greatest obstacles to love that you can identify, and how can they be overcome?

In Closing

- Make a list of tangible ways you can demonstrate love to others.
- Pick something on the list that you do not normally do, and do it.

May 6th to May 13th

Lesson 7

Spirit of God; Spirit of the Antichrist

The Holy Spirit is indispensable for the life of the Church. We have already seen how John tells his readers that they have an anointing from the Spirit that abides in them and teaches them (1 John 2:26–27). Paul, too, stresses the importance of the Spirit when he calls the Word of God the “sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17). Jesus Himself promises entrance into the kingdom of God to those who are “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). Not everything that claims to be spiritual, however, is true. Our world is full of a bewildering variety of claims about spirits and the Holy Spirit. If you do a quick scan of programs on television or resources on the Web, you will likely find claims about ghosts, communication with the dead, advice on how to get in touch with your spirit, as well as special teachings supposedly given by the Holy Spirit. Some of these claims present themselves as compatible with Christianity, and some do not. So how is a Christian, who believes in the reality of the Holy Spirit and of angels, supposed to make sense of these contradictory and confusing messages? In this lesson, John gives advice on how to “test the spirits.”

Setting the Stage

John has already dealt with the topic of Christ and antichrists (see Lesson 4, 1 John 2:18–27). Now he returns to the same theme, but he shifts the focus from Christ to the Holy Spirit. Previously, John referred to all who denied that Jesus was the Christ as antichrists (1 John 2:22). Now he tracks the root error a step further back. He considers not only the person who denies Christ, but also the spirit who motivates that denial. This, he says, is the spirit of the antichrist (1 John 4:3). More generally, John’s discussion raises once again the question of truth versus error. He treats this issue as he treats all other issues by using stark contrasts. One’s confession is either from the Spirit of God or the spirit of the antichrist. There is no middle position, nor is there room for a superficial humility that would claim that all religions have a piece of the truth.

74. What claims have you heard that are presented as coming from the Spirit?

75. On what basis do you normally evaluate such claims?

Testing the Spirits

Read 1 John 4:1–3. Contradictory claims of truth revealed by the Spirit are nothing new in history. As we shall see, God’s people had to contend with these claims in both the Old and New Testaments. John’s instructions

about testing the Spirit focus on what a particular message confesses about Christ. We have already seen that John's opponents claimed to be without sin (1 John 1:8) and denied that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22). In these verses, however, John sharpens his criteria for testing the spirits by making Jesus' incarnation the touchstone of whether a given confession arises from the Spirit of God or the spirit of the antichrist. This is not the only criterion for testing spirits in the Scriptures, however. We can gain a more complete understanding of the issues involved by looking at passages in other parts of God's Word.

76. What criteria for testing the spirits are listed or depicted in the following passages?

a. Deuteronomy 18:20–22

b. Deuteronomy 13:1–3

c. Matthew 16:13–23

d. Galatians 1:8

e. 1 Corinthians 12:3

77. Taking these passages together with those we have reviewed in this section, how would you describe a comprehensive scriptural way of testing the spirits?

When you compare 1 John 4:3 with the other criteria listed in Scripture, the unique element in 1 John is that the Spirit of God confesses that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (4:2). John focuses on this criterion, it seems, because that is the heart of his opponents' error. They may well have taught, like later Gnostics, that Jesus was a normal human being, but that a spirit being called "Christ" descended on Him at His Baptism. This "Christ" later departed from Jesus before His crucifixion, or so they maintained.

78. What religious claims have you heard that would deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh?

Overcoming the World

Read 1 John 4:4–6. In 1 John, the "world" is a fearful place. By "world" John does not mean God's good creation. He means the fallen creation that is captive to darkness, hate, and murder. He means those who speak the words of the antichrist and the devil. However, as John tells his readers, Christians have already overcome those who are from the world. These forces are no reason for a Christian to lose hope. We Christians have this victory, not because we are greater than those in the world, but because "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

79. How does John’s description of life as a combat between “He who is in you” and “he who is in the world” give meaning to the daily tasks of your life? How does it give you comfort?

80. John assumes that a message from the world will be more popular than a message from God, because that is what the world wants to hear. What do you think are the most popular false messages in our world today?

God’s Word for Today

Sometimes when Christians want to depart from a clear teaching in the Scriptures, they claim that the Spirit is revealing something new in the church. For example, Scripture clearly prohibits homosexual activity (Romans 1:26–27), yet one bishop in a major Protestant denomination said in a sermon that God was doing a “new thing” in the Church by showing that homosexuality was a “state of being,” not a transgression of God’s Law. We can use this claim as a case study for “testing the spirits” today.

81. Using what you learned in this lesson, how would you evaluate the claim of this sermon?

82. Elsewhere, the sermon argues Christians should accept homo-sexuality as a God-given identity because of God’s inclusive love for all of humanity (John 3:16), which is the central message of Scripture. How does what you have learned about God’s love and light in previous lessons help you to respond to this argument? (See especially 1 John 3:18–24; 1:5–10.)

In Closing

- Skim the Book of Galatians, and make a list of the false positions that Paul combats there.
- Compare and contrast those positions with the false positions that John contends against in 1 John.

Lesson 8 Love and Fear

God strikes fear into the human heart. When God was about to give the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, for example, the people were terrified because the mountain was wrapped in smoke. They saw lightning and heard peals of thunder and a trumpet blast (Exodus 19:16–20). God has been known to kill the disobedient on the spot (see Leviticus 10:1–2; Acts 5:1–11). Ultimately, God promises to punish sinners in hell (Matthew 10:28). Nevertheless, it is also true that the entire Bible can be summarized as a story of God’s love for His people. God’s people were continually unfaithful, but God remained faithful and committed to them. This faithfulness and love toward His people unfolded as God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, kept them alive in the desert, and brought them to the Promised Land. It culminated in God’s sending His Son to die for the sins of the world. So which experience of God is ultimately decisive for our lives? Fear or love? There is good scriptural foundation for both reactions to God, but John tells us in the verses before us today that love has the last word.

Setting the Stage

In previous sections of his Epistle, John tells us that we are to love, not hate, our neighbor (1 John 2:7–11) and that we are to love one another rather than follow the murderous example of Cain (1 John 3:11–15). Now he shifts the focus from our relation to our neighbor to our relation to God. That relationship, he says, should be characterized by love (first and foremost God’s love toward us) and not fear. Only in this way can our relation to our neighbor be one of love and not hate.

83. If you feel comfortable, describe times that you have loved God and times that you have been afraid of Him.

84. Do you find that your attitude toward God affects your attitude toward your neighbor? Explain.

God’s Love for Us

Read 1 John 4:7–12. We find it easier to love people who love us first. Because of this, we may be tempted to think that God works the same way and that His love for us is really motivated by our love for Him. John, however, tells us that it is precisely the other way around. God loved us first. We did nothing to bring about that love.

85. Read verse 9. This is the ultimate picture of what love looks like. Reflect on this verse for a few minutes, and make a list of at least three characteristics of God’s love that you can derive from it. Compare and contrast these characteristics with ordinary human love.

86. Read verse 10. God’s love not only has these three characteristics, but also it is directed toward people who do not love Him. How does this fact change the way you estimate your own worth and that of others?

87. Read verses 11–12. In his Gospel, John also points out that “no one has ever seen God.” Read John 1:18 and compare it to 1 John 4:11–12. How does God make Himself visible? Do you think these passages contradict each other? Explain.

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

Read 1 John 4:13–21. The work of the three persons of the Trinity is evident in these verses. Out of love, God the Father sends His Son to be the Savior of the world. He also gives us of His Spirit as a pledge that we abide in Him and He in us. Since God is love, this means that we abide in His love, and His love abides in us. All of this gives us the confidence to stand before Him without fear on Judgment Day.

88. As you contemplate Judgment Day, what sources of fear do you find in yourself?

89. John says that we can have confidence on Judgment Day “because as He is so also are we in this world” (v. 17). How can we be secure in God’s love, knowing that day is coming?

90. Look at verse 18. In Luther’s Small Catechism, the explanations of most of the Commandments begin, “We should fear and love God so that . . .” How is this consistent with what John says in this verse?

God’s Word for Today

Though God certainly threatens to punish sin, His ultimate will is to inspire love in our hearts, not fear. This fact has many implications for our worship and our lives. Someone who relates to God primarily out of fear will exhibit different attitudes and behaviors than someone who relates to God primarily on the basis of God’s love.

91. People can go to church out of fear or out of love. How would someone motivated by fear describe the benefit of going to church? someone motivated by love?

92. People can put in an honest day’s work out of fear or out of love. What would someone motivated by fear hope to gain from this honesty? someone motivated by love?

In Closing

- Review Luther’s explanations of the Ten Commandments in the Small Catechism.
- Read 1 Corinthians 13, the most famous chapter about love in the Bible. Compare and contrast what Paul has to say about love with what we have learned from John.

After May 13th

Lesson 9 Faith

All human beings have faith in something. In his Large Catechism, Luther teaches that whatever one has faith in is one’s “god,” whether that is a pagan idol, money, learning, or anything else. In our day, some people feel that their life has no meaning unless they are in a romantic relationship. They have made relationships their god because that is where they find comfort and security. Still others measure their worth and gain their identity from their careers. For them, their career is their god. Even atheists who argue that all religion is irrational have a god in a sense. They have made human reason their god because they find in it the source of their confidence. For Luther, however, the heart and soul of Christianity is that we look to the true God for all good things and to no other source. That is what it means to have faith. That is why Luther insisted that salvation is by faith alone. That is another way of saying that all our hope and confidence are in Christ and what He has done for us, not in our own efforts at pleasing God. For Luther, the most subtle false god is our own good works. Good works are,

in fact, good and are commanded by God, but when they become the source of our confidence before God, they usurp Christ's role as our Savior; they themselves become our god. In a simple way, John speaks of both faith and works in this section, showing us how they should relate to each other.

Setting the Stage

Earlier in his Epistle, John made the point that we are God's children because of the love He has given us (1 John 3:1). In this section, John returns to this theme but adds another dimension to what it means to be God's child: faith. God's children believe that Jesus is the Christ. Faith in Jesus not only makes us God's children, but also it makes God's commands a delight and it overcomes the world. However, faith does not exist in a vacuum. Faith is based on testimony. From the very beginning of his First Epistle, John tells us that he is giving us eyewitness testimony (1 John 1:1–3). Now he fills out the details of his testimony by saying (somewhat cryptically) that the Spirit, the water, and the blood testify. We will explore the meaning of this statement in this lesson.

93. In your own words, describe what it means to believe that Jesus is the Christ. You may wish to review Lesson 4.

94. What events in Jesus' life do you think most clearly indicate that He is the Christ?

Faith and Works

Read 1 John 5:1–5. We noted in Lesson 3 that love is the fulfillment of the Law, and as such it is a demand God places on the Christian. When John introduces faith into the discussion, however, love seems to lose its character as a demand and take on a new character as something joyful and free.

95. Look at 1 John 5:3; then read Romans 7:7–25. Which passage better describes your experience of God's Law? Explain.

96. When John says that God's commands are not burdensome, he echoes the words of Jesus. How does Matthew 11:28–30 help us understand why God's commands are not burdensome?

97. Faith overcomes God's wrath by trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, but how does faith overcome the world?

The Spirit, the Water, and the Blood

Read 1 John 5:6–12. John says that the Spirit, the water, and the blood testify that Jesus is the Christ. However, to what these three refer is not immediately clear. We can gain a deeper understanding of this passage by pondering events in Jesus' life in which the Spirit, water, or blood is key.

98. Briefly note the way in which the Spirit, water, or blood figures in the following events of Jesus' life:

- a. Jesus' Baptism (John 1:29–34)
- b. Jesus turns water into wine (John 2:1–11)
- c. Jesus' side is pierced (John 19:34–35)

99. Pick the event that you think most clearly testifies that Jesus is the Christ (the Anointed One), and describe how the Spirit, the water, or the blood testifies to this.

100. Identify the way in which the Spirit, the water, and the blood continue to testify in the Church today according to the following passages:

- a. John 20:21–23 (Spirit)
- b. John 3:5 (water)
- c. John 6:53–55 (blood)

God's Word for Today

In the text for today, John gives us the testimony that forms the basis of our faith in Christ, and he spells out the victory that faith brings. This testimony and this faith bring us eternal life. For this reason, they also give us a new perspective on our daily lives.

101. Pick one aspect of your daily life, and describe how what you have learned about faith changes the way you view it.

102. How would your daily routine be different if you did not have faith?

In Closing

- Read Luther's explanation of the First Commandment in the Small Catechism. Note how Luther defines what it means to have faith.

Lesson 10 Prayer

In *The Devil's Dictionary*, American satirist Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914?) defined “pray” as follows: “PRAY, v. To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.” There is a kernel of truth to this irreverent definition of prayer. Does it not seem rather presumptuous of us to approach God's throne and present our requests? Who are we to think that we could gain

a hearing from the King of heaven? Luther, too, was aware of this difficulty. In fact, in his Large Catechism, he raises the issue of people who use this difficulty as an excuse not to pray. Luther tells us that we should not say to ourselves, “I am not holy or worthy enough. If I were as godly and holy as St. Peter or St. Paul, then I would pray”. Instead, Luther tells us we should take a different attitude: “Here I come, dear Father, and pray, not because of my own purpose or because of my own worthiness. But I pray because of Your commandment and promise, which cannot fail or deceive me”. In the reading for today, John addresses the same issue by stressing Christ’s promise to hear our prayer. He then turns his attention specifically to prayer for brothers and sisters who commit sin. In some cases, we should pray for them; in other cases, not. He then closes his Epistle with the promise of eternal life and the exhortation to stay away from idols.

Setting the Stage

Here at the end of his Epistle, John returns to a theme he brought up at the beginning: the word of life (see 1 John 1:1). He says that his purpose in writing is that “you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). As usual, however, John does not merely repeat a theme; he develops it further. Because we have eternal life in Christ, we also have the confidence that He hears our prayers and grants us what we ask in His name. This section then is a mini-manual on how to pray and what to pray for.

103. What kinds of things do you pray for? What kind of things do you feel uncomfortable praying for?

104. In your experience, what attitudes or habits get in the way of prayer?

Christ’s Promise concerning Prayer

Read 1 John 5:13–15. In these verses, John argues from the greater to the lesser. If God has given us eternal life in Christ, He surely also is concerned to hear and grant our prayer. This promise is a prominent theme in the Scriptures. Yet it is also possible for the promise to provoke a sense of anxiety in the Christian. What happens if I pray and nothing happens?

105. Along with 1 John 5:14–15, read the following Scripture passages. In your own words, summarize what Christ promises about prayer.

a. John 14:13–14

b. Matthew 7:7

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus tells us to pray “Thy will be done.” In 1 John 5:14, John says that our prayer should be “according to His will.” However, some Christians insist that we should not include that qualifier “if it be Your will” in our prayers because this shows a lack of faith. We should instead assume that God will grant us exactly what we ask for, they say, whether it be health or wealth or anything else. Often the promises cited in the previous question are brought forward as evidence for this position.

106. How would you respond to this objection? If you admit to yourself the possibility that God might not give you exactly what you ask for, are you showing a lack of faith? You may wish to consider the example of the three men in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:16–18).

Sin That Leads to Death

Read 1 John 5:16–18. John encourages his readers to pray for fellow Christians who commit sin. However, he does not suggest that we should pray for those who commit sin that leads to death. However, John doesn't define what that sin is. Nevertheless, we can gain some insight by comparing John's words with Jesus' words in Matthew.

Read Matthew 12:31–32. The Pharisees had said that Jesus casts out demons by the prince of demons. In effect, they were saying that a work Christ performed by the power of the Holy Spirit was, in fact, performed by the devil. In response, Jesus says that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

107. Read 1 John 1:8–10. How is claiming we have not sinned similar to Jesus' description of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? What does each say about God?

108. How would you describe sin that does not lead to death? How is it different from sin that leads to death?

Conclusion

Read 1 John 5:19–21. At the end of his Epistle, John traces the stark contrasts he has employed throughout the Letter back to their origins: God and the devil. We are from God, he says, but “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (v. 19).

109. Summarize from your recollection of 1 John the characteristics of the world and the characteristics of God.

110. How does John's description of God and the world help you to think of your own life differently than you have before?

God's Word for Today

Prayer is the culmination of all that God has done for our salvation. He sent His Son to give us true understanding and eternal life. He has also promised to hear our prayer and grant us anything we ask according to His will. Therefore, it is only natural that we pray for God's life to extend to others as well.

111. How often do you pray that God would grant life to a specific person?

112. How does what you have learned about prayer encourage you to make use of this privilege?

In Closing

- Read Jesus' instructions about prayer in Matthew 6:5–15.
- Read Luther's explanation of the Lord's Prayer in the Small Catechism.

Bonus Lesson 11 2 and 3 John

The next two Epistles of John, especially 2 John, may be viewed as miniature versions of 1 John. They pick many of the same themes John deals with in his First Epistle: love, God's Commandments, anti-christs, abiding in the teaching of Christ, testimony to the truth. Of these themes, the two most prominent are love and truth. However, at least in our society, it is not immediately apparent that love and truth are compatible. Love is often viewed as synonymous with acceptance and toleration. Therefore, any insistence on truth tends to be seen as narrow and exclusive. This can be the case even in the Church, where an insistence on pure doctrine is sometimes seen as "unloving." It might appear that one must choose between truth and love. John, however, insists on both. In 2 John, he returns to the commandment of love, which he says his readers have had from the beginning. But he also insists that those who do not abide in the teaching of Christ do not have God. In 3 John, he commends Gaius for his love, but he also says that what brings him the greatest joy is that his children are walking in the truth. These two Epistles, then, can help us overcome the false dichotomy between truth and love.

Setting the Stage

In 2 and 3 John, John writes to the church again, probably in Asia Minor. While 2 John is addressed to a particular church, addressing the entire community as the "elect lady," 3 John is addressed to an individual in the church named Gaius. One can see very much the same conflict going on in 2 and 3 John that was addressed at length in 1 John. There are people in the church who refuse to love and who refuse to confess the truth that Jesus Christ came in the flesh.

113. In what areas do you sense a possible conflict between truth and love?

114. How do you resolve this conflict?

2 John

John's greeting at the beginning of the Letter ends with the phrase "in truth and love" (2 John 3). These words, *truth* and *love*, introduce the two major themes of 2 John. The first half of the Letter deals with God's command to love, while the second half deals with the necessity to confess the truth that Jesus Christ came in the flesh.

115. Read 2 John 1–6. As he does in 1 John, so here John reminds his readers that the commandment to love is not new; they have had it from the beginning. He does not, however, give precise information about how the original recipients of his Letter were falling short of this command. From what you remember of 1 John, sketch how John's readers were failing to love. You may wish to review the following passages:

a. 1 John 2:15–17

b. 1 John 3:16–18

c. 1 John 4:19–21

116. Read 2 John 7–13. John states that the deceivers refuse to confess “the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh” (v. 7). Why do you think John singles out this doctrine as key? You may wish to review your discussion in Lesson 1.

117. John says that the consequence of this erroneous belief is that such a person “does not have God” (v. 9). John does not explicitly discuss love at this point, but why do you think it would be difficult to love without faith in the incarnation?

3 John

This short Letter deals with support and opposition within the congregation to which John is writing. The Letter is addressed to an individual named Gaius, who welcomed a group of Christian missionaries. John cites this as evidence of Gaius’s love (v. 6). On the other hand, a man named Diotrephes refused to welcome the brothers.

118. Read 3 John 1–8. There is precedent in the New Testament for missionaries sometimes to depend on people of goodwill for their physical needs. Where do missionaries get their support according to the following passages?

a. Matthew 10:5–15

b. 2 Corinthians 12:14–18

c. 1 Thessalonians 2:9

119. Given the example of Paul in the last two passages, it may be that traveling missionaries did not always feel comfortable asking for support. How does offering such support, even when it is not asked for, benefit not only the recipient but the giver as well? 120. Read 3 John 9–15. Diotrephes is the opposite of Gaius because he refuses to welcome the brothers. But his problem is not only with love. How does John imply that Diotrephes has a problem with the truth as well?

God’s Word for Today

Since truth and love are the two major themes of these two Letters, we want to think about how truth and love function in our life in the Church today. Truth and love are not opposed to each other, but are in fact inseparable from each other. No one can keep one without the other.

121. To what concrete acts of love do you think the truths of Christianity should lead?

122. How would you respond to someone who claims that the Church should focus on acts of love and not worry so much about the truth?

In Closing

Close this study by praying the words of “Spread the Reign of God the Lord”

Spread the reign of God the Lord; Spoken, written, mighty Word;
Ev’rywhere His creatures call, to His heav’nly banquet hall.

Tell how God the Father’s will, made the world, upholds it still,
How His own dear Son He gave, us from sin and death to save.

Tell of our Redeemer’s grace, who to save our human race.
And to pay rebellion’s price, gave Himself as sacrifice.

Tell of God the Spirit giv’n, now to guide us on to heav’n.
Strong and holy, just and true. Working both to will and do. Amen!