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**Day 360 – December 26**

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## **Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)**

***First Letter by John***

***Second Letter by John***

***Third Letter by John***

**Readings: *1 John 1:1-5:21; 2 John 1-13; 3 John 1-14***

### ***Reflections:***

- **First Letter by John:** The Epistles of John are without doubt written by the same person as the Gospel of John. The style and content of these letters fit perfectly with the Gospel. Now with this said, it should be noted that the first writing is not a letter but a sermon that was written to be circulated among the churches. Second and Third John are both brief personal letters by the same person. Most conservative scholars believe this to be the disciple John. The themes of this letter focus on the many of the same themes found within John's biography. Most conservative scholars believe John did most of his writing, possibly with the help of scribes toward the end of his life.
- **John's eyewitness testimony:** The sermon opens in very similar fashion to John's biography of Jesus. The emphasis is on Jesus as pre-existent with God and then revealed to us as God's word. There is also the strong affirmation that the writer is an eye witness to this truth. We see also the emphasis on intimate relationship with the Father and Jesus. Sharing this message is grounded in a deep experience of joy.
- **Walking in light of righteousness – basis for fellowship:** John is clear that to have true intimacy in relationship we must be firmly committed to living in the truth. As we hide in our shame and sin, we hide ourselves from other people and live in isolation. When the love of God expressed through complete forgiveness secures our hearts we are free to embrace our vulnerability and weakness and allow it to be the basis for our interdependence and intimate relationship with others. Rather than being our own rescuers, living in the light of the truth allows us to experience God as our rescuer. The key in community to living in the truth is to understand the full nature of God's forgiveness through Jesus.
- **Sin must be confessed:** Everyone messes up. Everyone needs forgiveness. Therefore we must cultivate a culture where it is normal when we all get honest about our sins, mistakes and failures and talk about it honestly so that we can experience the grace of forgiveness and support each other in learning new mental and lifestyle patterns.

- Christ is advocate: Everyone on the planet has Jesus for their own personal advocate and rescuer if we want him. Therefore we must realize that everyone including you and me can have incredible confidence before God because of Jesus.
- Only obedient know God: To live as an intimate friend of God means that our hearts must be set on doing the things God asks us to do. That starts with embracing his love and allowing it to mature our lives. If we live in intimate relationship with God and do what he asks us to do, we will start to live a life that emulates Jesus life. It is pretty simple when you think about it. Notice the absence of rules, regulations, rituals and routines. Notice the complete absence of religion. It is all about relationship and learning to live in daily dialogue and dependence.
- Love is test: We see how John understood that the kingdom of Christ has come but it is more like a seed that grows than an army that crushes all opposition. The key to this kingdom is to love others. If we hate others, like our enemies, our hate blinds us from the truth of God's grace and we become spiritual blind and stumble in the darkness of our own anger. Love frees us to see others the way God sees them.
- Reasons for writing: We see here steps to spiritual maturity. The spiritual childhood phase is focused on experiencing God's forgiveness and getting to know God. The spiritual adolescent phase is focused on growing spiritually strong, experiencing God's word in your life (hearing God speak) and using your life to overcome the power of the enemy in your sphere of influence. It is like you become a spiritual soldier in advancing the kingdom of Christ. The spiritual parent phase returns to a deep intimate knowledge of God embracing all of who God is right from the beginning of time. Implied in this idea of us growing to be like spiritual mothers and fathers is taking ownership of other people in community and investing our lives in them. As we grow in Christ, God's desire is for us to get to know him better and better even as we are changed from the inside out and invest into others.
- Love God, not the world: It is vital we live counter-cultural lives and intentionally protect ourselves from being influenced by the negative or sinful elements in the dominant culture. Sensual desires for pleasure, greed to possess, and the pride of position and power are all very powerful forces that can start to control our lives. We must intentionally guard against these influences as we remain firmly fixed on simply living the will of God. Virtually nothing this world offers us will remain therefore we must focus on what really matters for eternity: people!
- Warning about antichrists – beware of antichrists: We see evidence again that the early church likely believed in Christ's return happening in their lifetime with the reference to it being the "last hour." For a suffering church it makes sense that they felt the finality of their time. The situation around them no doubt felt like it was all coming to an end. The term "antichrist" simply means someone who is against (anti) Christ. The term is almost always used in the plural to suggest that there are many who live in opposition to the message of Jesus. These are the false teachers that both Paul and Peter warned against. In the history of

the church the term “antichrist” has been associated with the “man of lawlessness” in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 or the Beast of Revelation. This is a false connection as John is clearly thinking of many individuals who oppose Christ in what they teach.

- Antichrists deny deity: The anointing of the Holy One most likely refers to the Spirit filling their lives. See 1 Samuel 16:13; Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38 for a direct connection between the work of the Spirit and being anointed by God. The work of the Spirit was to guide them into the truth of Christ (John 16:13). An antichrist is anyone who denies Jesus is the Christ or Messiah. Within the early church as we saw with Paul and Peter’s writings there were many spiritual teachers who taught in opposition to the message of Jesus. John simply says that the only way to truly have relationship with the Father is through his Son, Jesus.
- Continue your faith: Remaining in intimate relationship with the Father and Son means allowing God’s word and his Spirit to remain in your life. See John 15:1-17 for more of Jesus’ teaching on this. Again we see that the role of the Spirit (the anointing) is to guide us into all truth. Rather than placing our trust in a set of doctrines or precepts, God offers us the security of relationship where through his presence in our lives he guides us into all truth as we follow Jesus, study Scriptures and live together in community helping each other grow in living the truth in love. Our security rests in that daily dialogue and dependence.
- Living as children of God – Be righteous as children: We see that our spiritual transformation comes from our identity in and intimacy with Christ. We are God’s children and so because we are connected to God through Christ, he is changing us to become like Christ in all things. We simply need to partner with the work God is already doing in us. Even though we don’t know exactly what we will be like when we receive our new bodies, we know that we will be like Jesus and what he modeled for us at the resurrection. This means we don’t have to strive and struggle to make ourselves into someone we are not. We simply need to stay close to God and remain submitted to his guidance for our lives. He is the one changing us.
- Sinning is contrary to faith: Sin is breaking the law. Because he is removing our sinfulness that also means he is removing any need for the law. Again we are being changed by remaining in intimate friendship with God.
- God’s children live righteously: John’s main point is that if we are rooted in Christ we will be changed and our lives will reflect this change. If someone is not connected to Christ, they won’t be changed. Jesus appeared to destroy the work of the enemy, particularly the work he accomplishes in our lives when we align ourselves unwittingly with his self-centered approach to life and relationships.
- God’s children love each other: John uses Cain as an example to show the connection between being self-centered, becoming consistently angry, hating another person and then ultimately doing something destructive to the person or relationship. To be rooted in Christ means that our lives and relationships are shaped and nurtured by self-sacrificial love. This is what it means to be righteous as God is righteous.

- Love experienced by actions: We see similar to James' teaching on faith when we are changed by God our lives will demonstrate this change by our loving actions. God's love will move us to serve others with whatever we have (see Romans 12:1-3 on being a living sacrifice) and this particularly means we will care for the materially poor. We aren't called to talk love but to be love.
- Obeying brings confidence: When we live the message rather than just talk about it that is when we feel most secure in our relationship with God because we can see him working through us. When we give away his love we get the benefit of feeling his love for us at the same time. Sometimes we feel guilty about stuff we still struggle with and so it makes us want to pull back from God. John encourages his listeners that God knows everything and so there is no reason to pull back. Rather than shrinking back to God when we struggle, we should run to him knowing he is there to help us. As we remain in that confident trust relationship, even when we struggle, we can still come to him boldly to seek his help knowing that we are still firmly committed to obey all he asks us to do.
- Must believe and love: Our trust relationship with God (faith) leads us to love others (obey his commands of love). This all flows from him living his life through us by the Spirit at work in lives.
- Distinguishing unbelievers from believers – antichrists deny incarnation: Here is a little window into the functioning of the early church. They had the experience of sharing in community what they sensed the Spirit saying. John wanted them to understand that the Spirit of God always affirms the truth of Jesus, him being the Messiah, him living as God with us. False prophets may say many insightful things and sound very wise but if the message they carry rejects Jesus then we know that the spirit they listen to is not the Spirit of God. The particular lie that was being promoted is rooted in the Gnostic teaching that maintained that spirit was good but the physical world was evil. This is why they would reject the notion that Jesus had a true physical body. They would say he was divine but they would reject that he actually had a body. Today, people argue the reverse. He was a normal man but not God with us. The early followers of Jesus maintained both. He was fully human, fully physical. He was fully divine, fully embodying the Spirit of God.
- Antichrists' worldly doctrines: John continues to encourage his listeners not to be afraid but discerning. God's presence in us is greater than anything we will encounter in this world, naturally or spiritually. If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31)
- Believers reflect God's love: Love is again underscored as the primary evidence for God working in a person's life. True love is defined by Jesus, particularly his death for us. As we love, people are able to catch a glimpse of God's true nature and heart.
- Believers have God's Spirit: The Spirit is another evidence of God at work in our lives. John points out again that they are witnesses of fact that Jesus was truly "God with us" and that Jesus opens the way for God to enter into our lives.

- Spirit of love: Self-saving, self-centeredness came into humanity at the fall when Adam and Eve chose to eat from the tree of “I’ll decide for myself what is right and wrong.” The first major effect of their broken relationship with God was fear: “I was afraid because I was naked (vulnerable) and so I hid (saved myself by hiding the real me).” When we live in a restored intimate relationship with God, his love becomes the foundation of our lives. His love grows to maturity (completeness) and leads to us having confidence before God, no longer hiding the real us. The key verse: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love (divine love) drives our fear...” As God loves us, his love frees our lives from fear and enables us to truly love others and live other-centered lives.
- Loving God requires loving others: Our love for God must result in loving others. Just like in a family, you can’t just say I love my parents but hate my siblings. Your parents will want you to learn to love your siblings as well because they love you and your brothers and sisters and they want their family defined by truly loving relationships.
- Loving God requires obedience: To love others we simply need to follow the teachings of Jesus. He modeled for us what true love is. Jesus’ teachings, not the Torah, are what are in focus when John refers to God’s commands. Our trust in Jesus (our faith) is what empowers us to live this way and as we are empowered we break free from the pattern of this world and truly live a counter-cultural life. Overcoming the world does not mean setting up an earthly kingdom or nation but rather overcoming the influence of the world’s system and values on your life. We are empowered by God to live as agents of grace and love.
- Testimony to Jesus: This passage is very rich in symbolism. Ritual cleansing by water was an outward sign or indicator that testified to a commitment to God. Offering a sacrifice (blood of the animal) was a sign or indicator that testified to a commitment to God. These were both well known ways that people would testify to their commitment to God within the Torah. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus also died as the final sacrifice for our sins. Jesus came both by water and by blood. Yet also with the coming of the Spirit at his baptism, Jesus came by the Spirit as well. John remembered all three of these experiences and saw them as testifying to the truth that Jesus was truly “God with us.” As we are baptized in water, share the Lord’s Supper (cup of the new covenant symbolizing his blood), and are filled with the Spirit, we enter into this same remembrance of Jesus. We again testify to the truth of Jesus. (Note: in 1 John 5:7-8 there was an insertion in later Greek texts concerning the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This insertion was very late first being written in the margins on early manuscripts starting around 1200 CE. Although a few very conservative scholars try to still assert the authenticity of this inserted statement on the Trinity virtually all scholars conservative and liberal alike accept this as a later church insertion.)
- Believers’ lives testify: Our basic testimony? Jesus is our source of life, now and into eternity. Jesus changes us from the inside out by his love and power and life working through us. It isn’t about religion and rules or putting on a good face. It is about Jesus’ life flowing through us and enabling us to truly live the life God originally intended when he redeemed us.

- Assurance in Christ – Assurance in eternal life: This is a close parallel to John 20:31, “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” This sermon by John would make a natural follow up to listening to the stories from Jesus’ life.
- Assurance in proper prayer: Throughout this sermon John has reinforced over and over that there are only two ways a person can live their life. They can be born again by trusting in Jesus and begin to experience God changing them from the inside out by the Spirit so that they truly learn to love others with God’s love. Or they can live for themselves and be swept along by the influence of this world that is under the control of Satan. Either God is going to shape your life or Satan is. Now John calls his listeners to prayer and to make maximum use of the great gift they have to be able to ask God for all the help they need. The key to align your heart with God’s heart and then as you ask for anything “according to his will” it will be done for us. So we see three parts to prayer. First, we must align our hearts with God’s heart. Then we know what is important to God and what he wants to accomplish through us. Second, we pray for God to help us to do that and to partner with us to see this happen. Third, we then start to live in faith trusting that God will answer our prayer because we have prayed it in alignment with his will and purpose. Prayer isn’t about getting God to do what we want but learning to want only what God wants. Now this comes with a second issue. How do we pray for other people who are not living in surrender to God’s will? John seems to indicate that there is a way of sinning or a kind of sin that comes from weakness in a person’s life that we must come along side and support them in prayer. We are to pray for God’s life to change them from the inside out and so pray for God’s Spirit to lift them up out of a pattern of struggle and failure. There is another kind of sin, most likely rooted in rebellion, where a person is intentionally rejecting Christ and intentionally moving straight towards their own judgment and death. This may again be a reference to the antichrists (1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-6) and those who are completely opposed to God and reject Jesus (also see Hebrews 6:4-8; 2 Peter 2:10-22; Jude 8:13 for strong warnings about false teachers who were under God’s judgment). In any case it is clear that John’s listeners knew what he was talking about it. He wanted his listeners to prioritize praying for those who really did want a relationship with God and not to focus a lot of time and energy trying to pray for people whose wills are directly opposed to God. Our prayers can’t change the will of another person. That would be magic.
- Security in Jesus Christ: Just another restatement of our security in God based on him changing us from the inside out.
- No security in idols: A simple warning against idols. It is interesting he doesn’t say more but apparently this simple warning was all that was needed.
- Second letter by John: This letter, like the book of Third John, appears to be written near the same time as the sermon of First John. It would appear that John is writing in both cases to house church leaders.

- **Salutation:** John simply refers to himself as the Elder in both Second and Third John. In both cases the readers obviously know John well and he has no need to establish his apostolic authority but prefers to be known as a respected peer. In this first letter he doesn't use the person's name but simply refers to her as "the chosen lady and her children". If John was using the term "chosen lady" to refer to the church, it would seem odd that he would add "and her children" as those in the church would be included in the former phrase. As well the letter ends by referring to the "children of your chosen sister". Therefore it is more likely a specific woman who was leading a house church who actually had a sister that John knew personally. If we take this view, then here is more evidence of women in leadership. We may also ask why John calls her "the chosen sister" rather than simply use her name or refer to her as his sister. This may suggest that there is more to the story of how this woman became a Christ-follower or a leader. For example, she may have been reluctant to step into leadership or had a dramatic conversion to Christ and as a result, she may have been given the nickname "chosen sister" by John to underscore God's calling on her life as someone God had intentionally selected for this role in community. John's strong emphasis even in the salutation is the truth living in us and through us. Themes of grace, mercy, peace and love are also woven into the introduction.
- **Call for love and obedience:** John affirms his joy that some of her children are walking in the truth. It may be that she has adolescent or young adult children still with her in her home. She likely has no husband as he is not mentioned at all. With that said, it is probably more likely that this phrase "your children" refers to the people connected to her house church that she has a kind of spiritual ownership over. We see in Third John 4 that John refers to "his children" "walking in the truth." This affirms that like Paul (1 Corinthians 4:15) John believes that spiritual leadership means allowing God to use us as a spiritual parent figure for others. John reminds her of the importance to continue to walk in Christ's commands of love. Loving others is the most basic command of Christ. That is what John tells people right off the top and what he reminded them to do even after many years. Just love other people.
- **Warning against antichrists:** John now warns here against deceivers, people who claim to follow Christ but actually oppose him and his teaching. Again it seems clear that the specific teaching was Gnosticism and the denial of the humanity of Christ. John warns this leader not to take someone like this into your home which probably means not inviting them into your Home Church to share their ideas. If a Home Church leader welcomed such a teacher into their home church it would help to further spread this false teaching. John's warning against running ahead probably refers to a kind of super spirituality where a person starts to believe there is new secret teaching that is only for the mature. John basically says that when you depart from the basic teachings of Christ you actually lose your relationship with Christ. The core of Jesus' teaching is simply to love other people and not get wrapped up in all kinds of super spiritual or false teachings.
- **Hope for personal visit:** We see the importance of early communication when a potential problem arises. John didn't wait for a trip to send this note to make sure this leader stays on

track. Yet we also see his value on meeting face to face to continue the discussion. Papyrus was expensive and so he preferred to meet personally to talk this all through and ensure they remained unified. When developing leaders both writing out key teachings and meeting face to face to discuss the key themes are important to the leadership development process.

- Greetings: John may be in contact with the nieces and nephews of this woman and so he sends their greetings. Or if these “children” are simply members of her sister’s house church, John may be simply using this family term to remain consistent with his earlier imagery (2 John 1,4). Her sister was also referred to as “chosen” and so she also is affirmed for God’s calling on her life as well. This is a reminder that leaders should regularly find ways to affirm those they lead and to find ways to regularly express how God works in and through their lives.
- Third letter by God: Like Second John, John is writing to a house church leader to encourage the leader and speak into a few leadership issues within the community. We see how John is helping this house church leader sort out the relationships within the house church. Again John is providing good role modeling for anyone who is developing leaders within a church community.
- Salutation: John simply calls himself “the elder” suggesting he is well known and simply wants to be known as a respected peer. He doesn’t need to use his apostolic title to establish himself to this leader. John also just affirms his love for Gaius. We see with a few simple words John’s ownership of Gaius and freedom to express his love for him.
- Joy in Gaius’ faithfulness: We see a window into John’s prayer for Gaius. He prays for his health and continued blessing in his life as he continues to spiritually mature. John affirms him for his faithfulness and the joy he has as a kind of spiritual father figure (see 1 Corinthians 4:15; 1 Thessalonians 2:6-12) to Gaius.
- Commendation of Gaius: Gaius had taken some itinerate leaders into his home and had provided support and hospitality for them. Although he didn’t know them at all, he had provided practical support. We see how vulnerable these travelling leaders were. They had relied on the grace and support of house church leaders like Gaius. During times of persecution, these house church leaders still needed to remain connected to be taught by qualified leaders. Yet, these leaders could not look to normal jobs or the support of those who weren’t Christ-followers. They had to rely on the support of Christ-followers. John affirms these travelling leaders are his partners in ministry and he affirms Gaius for his care for them.
- Reproof of Diotrephes: Diotrephes is apparently a renegade house church leader who has control issues. He loves to be number one and be in control (literally in the Greek: “to have preeminence” suggesting domination). He didn’t want to support these travelling leaders probably because he wants to be the primary teacher of his own house church and doesn’t want anyone else to come in take that place of teaching his group. Possibly out of jealousy,



he actually opposed these leaders coming into the area and was speaking against them. Unfortunately this is not an uncommon issue. Many times insecure leaders will become controlling and jealous. This is something that must be lovingly confronted by other leaders.

- Exhortation to do good: John simply calls Gaius and the others to not imitate this bad behavior and warns that people who do bad stuff like this simply don't get God and his heart. If you see God and get God's heart, you will not want to do anything that is evil or wrong or self-centered or reflects pride and arrogance.
- Commendation of Demetrius: Demetrius is likely one of the travelling leaders that Gaius had welcomed but Diotrephes had failed to welcome. This would make sense as John knows him and wants to affirm him publically to the church there.
- Hope for personal visit: See notes on 2 John 12.
- Greetings: John refers to his close relationships locally and within Gaius' house church as friends sending greetings to friends. We see here the common experience that Christ-followers maintained friendship and family connection across the various regions where the church had spread. Here in 2 and 3 John we see how natural it was for Christ-followers to relate to each other as an expression of their unity in Christ.