

Study 3

1 John 3:18–4:21

Right relationship with God

DAY 1: Study 2 review notes

1. Read the Study 2 review notes. What attitude are people who believe in Jesus to have towards sin?

2. a) What example of love does John give to help us love people?

b) How can you use this example of love to help you love the people around you more effectively?

DAY 2: 1 John 3:18–24

3. How do you think the truth expressed in verse 20b would help us deal with our condemning hearts?

4. John writes that we can stand confidently before God and receive from him whatever we ask. Why can we do this? (v 22)

5. How can we be sure that we “live in him”?

6. Who confirms in our hearts that we know God?

DAY 3: 1 John 4:1–4

The false teaching that John was addressing concerned a belief that Jesus was not God in human flesh. These teachers thought Jesus became the Christ (that is, the Son of God) at his baptism but died as a man, not as God's son. But to call him Jesus Christ is to acknowledge his humanity (Jesus) and his divinity (Christ).

7. Why did John instruct the believers to “test the spirits”?

8. What is the difference between a ‘true’ and a ‘false’ spirit?

9. Who will help us overcome the antichrists (those who are against Christ)? (See also 3:24.)

DAY 4: 1 John 4:1–6

10. In your understanding, how do we overcome “the one who is in the world”?

11. Why does the world listen to false prophets?

12. How are the teachers of the truth different from the false prophets?

DAY 5: 1 John 4:7–12

13. Where does love come from?

14. How did God show his love to us?

15. Why should our lives be characterised by love? (vv 7–8,11)

DAY 6: 1 John 4:13–16

16. How can a person be sure that she or he has a relationship with God?

17. a) What fact is John giving personal testimony to in verse 14?

b) What is the essential part of such a witness (testimony)?

DAY 7: 1 John 4:17–21

18. What has overcome our fear of God's punishment?

19. Why can't we just love God and not those around us?

Study 3 review notes

(to be read at home after the group meeting)

1 John 3:18–4:21

In this section John puts particular focus on how we can know we have a genuine relationship with God. He shows us some specific ways we can be certain of this and, in the process, teaches us about love.

God's command to believe

In John's teaching, being sure of a right relationship with God seems to be both simple and complex. It is simple because God has made it clear that he commands everyone to believe that his Son, Jesus, is God and that he came to earth and died for us, sinful people, to make us right with God. This is the witness of the apostles. In accepting their witness, we accept God's command: believe in the Lord Jesus (3:23).

The key thing which characterises a Christian's life is that he or she has the Holy Spirit. We need the Holy Spirit to be real Christians. The Holy Spirit is truly God. He is the one who teaches us that what the apostles taught is true. That is: Jesus Christ came in the flesh, died for our sins and rose again (4:2).

In other words, to obey the command of God to believe in the name of his Son, we need God's help. We cannot do it by ourselves. If we believe that Jesus truly is God and came to earth to die for our sins, then we have experienced the genuine work of the Holy Spirit in our lives (4:6).

It is impossible to overemphasise the importance of the Spirit's work in our lives. False teachers were denying that Jesus was the Christ — the Messiah; the Son of God. John knew it was vital that believers are not led astray by such false spirits. Therefore he commands us to "test the spirits"

(4:1). Any person or teaching that refuses to acknowledge that Jesus Christ “has come in the flesh” (v 2) is not from God. But praise God! The Spirit has opened our eyes to recognise the good news of Jesus and continues to remind us of what Jesus has done for us (4:13).

There is nothing we need to do to earn God’s love for us because God loved us first and sent his Son to be our atoning sacrifice (4:10). God has done everything necessary for us to have a good relationship with him, even though we have done so many wrong things. Believing in Jesus, as God commands, is the way we come into relationship with God.

By believing in Jesus we are obeying God. God saves us, however, not because of our obedience but because of Jesus’ death for us, as we saw in chapter 2. So, when we ask ourselves whether we believe and trust Jesus to deal with our sins, if we answer ‘yes’, John helps us see that we can be assured of this right relationship with God. We can be certain that we belong to God’s family and are at peace with him.

God’s command to love

The command to love is not a random command. It is something which demonstrates who we are as God’s children, because God is our Father and he is love (4:16). In other words, if we are God’s children, we will be like God, and the best way to describe God is that he is love. God shows us what love looks like. It is sacrificial: he sent his Son to die for us (v 9). It is not sentimental but deals with real people with real problems: God sent his Son to be an atoning sacrifice, to take care of our sin problem for us (v 10). Without God we wouldn’t know what love was really like. We might have a glimmering of an idea, but it is God who has fully displayed what love is like in the death of his precious Son for us.

In light of this, John tells us that God commands us to love and that, if we love, we know we are in a right relationship with God. This is enormously encouraging because, as we have seen, love is practical and visible. Assurance isn’t based on our emotions (which can change and sometimes aren’t reliable); nor is it based on an experience (which we might question later). Instead, God tells us to look at our lives. If

we believe that Jesus is God and if we can see evidence that we love the people around us, then we can be sure that we are in a right relationship with God. Of course, all of us will be learning throughout our lives to love with the kind of generosity and kindness that God has shown us, but beginning and growing in this love is something that characterises all Christians.

Confidence before God

Being in a right relationship with God is vitally important — as John reminds us — because judgment is coming. Jesus saves us from the terror of God’s judgment by taking our sins on himself and bearing our guilt: being our atoning sacrifice (4:10). When we trust him to do this for us, we no longer need to fear God’s judgment. His perfect love for us has swallowed up our fear. Now all we know of God is his generous, sacrificial love for us, even to making us close family with him: we are called “children of God” (3:1). John wants us to spend time being sure we are saved because of the awful consequences if we are not, and because, if we are, we do not need to fear coming judgment (4:14–18). God’s love for us in Christ should give us great confidence and joy.

As simple as this seems, there is also a complexity to being sure of this right relationship with God. Out of this belief in Jesus will flow a life of love and a personal relationship with God. We can’t separate loving God from obeying and knowing him, or from loving and serving others. We can’t earn a right relationship with God by loving others, but we show that God is our God by loving others. In fact, John says that we can’t pretend we love God (who we can’t even see) if we don’t love the people around us (who we can see).

We can be sure of our relationship with God. Our certainty rests on trusting God’s testimony about Jesus — and therefore having the Holy Spirit — and by an examination of our lives, to see whether we are growing in love. These are both evidences that God has saved us and that we can be confident before him.