

SERIES: Authentic Christian Community/1 John, Wk. 4

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I'll guarantee you today, people driving their cars, people watching television, people in the malls, people in the stores, they are broken; they are hurting; they are in pain; they are in fear; there's anxiety; there's despair; there's hopelessness; they're trying everything imaginable to figure out — is there anything in this life that works? — and I find myself wondering, “Do you realize what you're looking for? - the answer is it's right there.” It's everywhere this time of year. I find myself wishing, just once in the mall, I could get up on a table and say, “People, just give me ten minutes, to explain to you why this Jesus thing matters, in the midst of your pain, and your despair, and your hurting.” But obviously, I can't do that in the mall — but I can do it here, and that's what we want to talk about this morning.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 John, Chapter 5. Starting in Chapter 5, John begins to come to a conclusion, to kind of pull the whole book together. So, I think the best way to really understand Chapter 5, is to go back and remind ourselves of what we've talked about. So that's what we want to do, so if you turn back to Chapter 1, we're going to make a quick survey back through what we've covered so far. The book opens with the words

What was from the beginning, (*NASB, 1 John 1:1a)

John's not talking about the beginning of his letter; he's not even talking about the beginning of the life of Christ. He's talking about what was *in the beginning*. Before there was anything else, there was God, and God forever has dwelt in relationship with Himself. The doctrine of the Trinity is a belief that there is one God, but that one God is three Persons: God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit. Now we can't really comprehend all of that, but it's a very important doctrine, because it reminds us that, forever, God has been a God of love. Forever, God has been a God of relationship. This is the essence of life itself. Before there was anything else, there was God, and God was full of life, and God was full of love, and God lived in community with Himself. These aren't things that just started somewhere along the way. They've always been — because they're the essence of who God is: God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit, celebrating one another, loving one another, glorifying one another, living in relationship with one another, which is what theologians have often referred to as *The Dance of God*. Forever, God has lived in this community — this life with Himself — and this life is defined by celebrating the other, by giving oneself away. At a point in time, John tells us that Jesus came to make an invisible God visible. He became the visible manifestation of an invisible God. He came as the **...Word of Life**. It's a phrase that John used in his Gospel and he uses here in his epistle — that Jesus came to be the revelation, the Word of this life that has defined God forever, a life defined by giving oneself away, by celebrating another, by living for something more than just selfish consumerism. John tells us right from the beginning, that this is the story that I have heard myself — *I've heard it with my own ears; I've seen it with my own eyes; I've scrutinized it; I've touched Him* — and he's here to say, “This is the truth of Jesus; this is the God who came to make life known.” He reminds us that this life, that has defined God forever, is called *eternal life*. It's not just referring to a duration of life; it's referring to a quality of life — the life that has

defined God forever. John tells us in this opening paragraph that, of all things, God became flesh, in order to invite us as sinful people into the *dance of life*. God has danced with Himself forever, but, at a point in time, on the basis of what Jesus would do on the cross as the Savior of the world, it would be possible to invite us into the dance with Him forever.

But starting in Chapter 1, Verse 5, through Chapter 2, Verse 6, we reminded ourselves that **God is light**. It isn't just that God is *in* the light; it's that God *is* light. Therefore, if you're going to dance with Jesus, you must dance in the light: **...in Him there is no darkness at all** (1 John 1:5c).

But here's the problem: whenever we step into the light, the light exposes our "rats". The light exposes our stuff; the light exposes our sin. Now all of us have rats; all of us have "stuff". The moment of truth is, when we step into the light, and our stuff is exposed, what do we do? In that moment, we either go back into the darkness, in order that our rats might be hidden in the darkness, or we're willing to step into the light and experience the forgiveness that God offers. If we're unwilling to expose our rats — to deal with our rats — we slip back into the darkness, and what often happens is, then we go down the street, and we open our own dance studio, and we invite others to dance in our dance studio. But here are the ground rules: we will always dance in the darkness. We will maintain this superficial counterfeit concept of community, where no rats are exposed; everybody dances in the dark and, "Let's just live in despair together." The alternative is: we step into the light and we believe that God says that, "*He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" [1 John 1:9b] He's made it possible for us to dance with Him in the light together. That's the essence of real, authentic Christian community.

In Chapter 2, starting in Verse 7, John reminded us of an old, new commandment. The *old* is that God *is* love, and God has always called His people to be a people of love. What was *new* about this commandment is, as of Jesus coming and making a way of salvation and sending His Spirit to live within us, Jesus said, "I'm calling you to love as I have loved." He raised the bar — *to love as He had loved*. And the only way to do that is to experience His salvation, to have His power, to have His presence, to have His Spirit within us — to love as Jesus loved. We defined Biblical love, not primarily as a feeling or an emotion, but as an act of our will — to think of others as more important than ourselves, to die to ourselves, to give ourselves away for the good of another. If that's love, then hate is the contrast of that. Hate is not primarily an emotion, when it's defined Biblically. If love is to give myself away, then hate is to live for myself; it's to be selfish to the core. It's to use other people in order to make me happy, in order to give me significance, in order to give me pleasure — to live my life as a consumer and live for myself — and it's really important to remind ourselves, "That is our default setting. That is how I will live my life, unless something radically changes deep within me."

In Chapter 2, Verses 15-17, we talked about the two different operating systems in the world — that there is a world system that defines most people's lives. This, again, is the default setting. It's based on this idea, that once we're cut off from a relationship with God because of sin, we must become our own gods. We must make ourselves significant. We must give ourselves value, and the only way to do that is on the basis of my performance. My performance has to be measured; therefore it's measured on the basis of comparisons. So life becomes a competition. It's a competition about my significance and about my value, based on my performance. Again, there's nothing wrong with performance. The problem is when performance begins to define my value, when it begins to define my significance. As long as I'm living in that operating system, every single person is a competitor. I'm competing with you — therefore I'm not free to love you. I'm not free to die to myself; I'm not free to give myself away. As long as I'm stuck in that

operating system, I can never love like Jesus. The system requires me to be selfish to the core. We reminded ourselves that, in this system, there are no winners. There will never be a winner in this system. The system is designed by Satan himself. He is the architect of the system and it is designed to destroy you. That's the whole point! The Bible says, *there is a way that seems right, but in the end it is destruction*, and that is the system of the world.

But there is an alternative. The alternative is this scandalous thing called grace — that God has made a way through Jesus and His death on the cross, that we can experience forgiveness of sin — to remove that which separates us from God, that we might have a right relationship with God. Having a right relationship with God, I get my significance and my value by being rightly related to Him. Now we're back to Genesis 2. That's the way God intended for it to be, and, out of that, I live my life. Out of that, I perform, and I would suggest to you I perform better, because every day my self-esteem is not at stake. For the first time in my life, I'm actually free to die to myself and to give myself away. I'm actually free to think of others as more important than myself because my self-esteem — my value, my significance — is rooted in the person of God and, because that's on the basis of grace, it has nothing to do with my performance. And it's rock solid every day!

We went on in Chapter 2, Verse 18, through the end of the chapter, to remember that there are false teachers setting up a counterfeit Christianity. It seems like the right thing; it seems like the real deal, but it's counterfeit. It doesn't have the life; it doesn't have the power; it doesn't have the inside-out radical transformation that the true Gospel contains. At the center of the true Gospel is the doctrine on the person and work of Jesus. No group — no church, no organization — can be considered Christian, if they don't have the doctrine of Jesus correct. The whole idea of Christianity is built on the Christ — that Jesus is the Christ — and so that's always where we start. And this truth matters! We come together to dance with Jesus in the light, and so truth is at the center of authentic Christianity, authentic community.

In Chapter 3, John opens with his magnificent picture that we have been called *the children of God*. As a matter of fact, again he seems somewhat astounded that this could even be possible. The phrase in the Gospels, when Jesus calms the sea and the disciples say, "Who is this man, that even the wind and the waves obey him?" is the exact same Greek word that John uses, when he says, "Who is this God that He would love us so much that He would actually make us His children?" It's not just that He somehow dealt with our sin and gave us a ticket to Heaven; it's so much more than that. He actually has called us to be His children — to love us and to celebrate us — now and forever! John reminds us that the world did not recognize Jesus; they did not understand who He was when he walked on this Earth — and the same thing is true today. People don't understand who this Jesus is. They don't understand what He has done. They laugh at Him; they mock Him; they make fun of Him; they dismiss Him. But they do not understand who He was and what He did. But John reminds us, that even though today there may be this ongoing debate about what is ultimately true, this is the debate that ultimately will be settled. It will be settled when Jesus comes back and people see Him in all of His glory. Paul tells us in Philippians — in that moment — "*Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God.*" Once and for all, the debate will be settled and, as soon as we get this magnificent picture of Jesus in all of His glory, John tells us something absolutely stunning happens. Not only in that moment will we be *with* Him as His children, John tells us "*In that moment we shall be like Him*". We will be revealed as the magnificent children of God that He has radically changed from the inside-out, and the world will see that this is what Jesus has done. It will be an absolutely glorious moment!

But because that's true, the text goes on to say, then we must accept that something has radically changed on the inside. This is not cold, stale religion where, if this is the case, we need to follow the rules better. It is a transformational theology — that we actually have been changed. We've been born again. We have the seed of God; we have the nature of God; we have the Spirit of God — it's from the inside-out! And if that is true, then we can no longer sin as a way of life. The fact of the matter is: we all stumble; we all fall; we all sin. John's already said that in Chapter 1. But what the text talks about here in Chapter 3 is: we can't sin as a way of life. When we sin, it bothers us. When we sin, we're grieved. There's something deep within us that says, "I don't want to live that way; I don't want to offend God," and we feel the sorrow of that; we feel the conviction of that; we feel the grief of that. It's a very sobering text to remind us: if we can sin as a way of life and that just simply doesn't bother us, we have every reason to believe that we've never really experienced the life-changing power of Jesus. It's important to remind ourselves, just because we know the right answers on a quiz doesn't mean we've ever really embraced the message and experienced Jesus' transformational power in our lives.

He goes on in Chapter 3 and reminds us again, starting in Verse 11. He goes back to the topic of love, and how important it is that we love as Jesus has loved. And basically he says because this is true — this is what's in us; this is what will flow out of us — no longer can we look at the world and its brokenness and its pain and its suffering and its struggles, and just not care. Something is changed inside of us. Our heart grieves and there's something that says, "This isn't the way it's supposed to be," and we get this vision for what God intended for the world and there's something in us that says, "This world is not acceptable and I can't just sit by and watch it." And so this love of God begins to flow through us, but the problem is, we don't always act on that. We aren't always as loving as we should be; we aren't always as active as we should be about doing the right thing; and so our hearts condemn us and say, "You know you're a lousy Christian. If you were a good Christian, you would have loved more; you would have done this; you would have done that," and what John says is, "That's part of what's happening inside." We've changed, and sometimes we don't live that way, and our heart condemns us. But God comes along and says, "Even though your heart condemns you, it condemns you because you've been radically changed, because you're being changed from the inside-out," and God knows the truth and He says, "I'm making you into a magnificent child of mine," and over and over again we're reminded that God is changing us from the inside-out.

At the end of that text, we reminded ourselves that one of the big things that prohibits community in Christian circles, is we have a tendency to pick at each other. Now that we understand the bar is way up here, and now we understand this is how we should live, we have a tendency to kind of judge one-another and pick at one-another, remind ourselves of everything we're doing wrong — and we reminded ourselves that nobody really likes to be fixed. If every time I show up with a group of people, they pick at me and they're trying to fix me, and they remind me of all the ways I've let God down today, I really don't want to be around those people; I don't need more of that. But rather, we need to take one out of God's playbook and say, "Even though you may be discouraged, even though you may feel like you didn't measure up today, what's happening inside of you is absolutely magnificent. God is changing you from the inside-out." We need to spend more time encouraging, more time celebrating, more time actually believing that God is doing a radical work and say, "These are all the ways that I see it in your life, and it's real and it's true, and I do believe it's going to come to pass, and let's celebrate that together."

John goes on, then, in Chapter 4. He reminds us that we need to **test the spirits**. Not everyone that says, "This is from God," is really speaking for God. We need to test the spirits and make sure that what's being said as coming from God, or coming from the Spirit of God, or even

coming from the Bible, actually is. And then John took us back again: the first test is always having to do with the person and work of Jesus — understanding who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us. If any so-called Christian organization misses on that one, it's a miss; it's counterfeit! It's always where we start.

Community is a term used a lot in Christian circles, but it's a term that's hard to define, and it's even harder to experience. As one Christian writer put it, people who only dream of community usually destroy it, but those who love people without expectation, unknowingly create it. **True Christian community requires both an understanding and belief in the truth of who Jesus is, and who we are in Christ.** It's not something that we just turn off and on like a light switch. It's a way of life. It's a value. It's not something we just go out and make happen, but rather it's the result, the outflow of the life of Christ in us, and living out the love of God in us to others.

So the book of First John probably takes around 15 minutes to read it through from beginning to end. The original audience would have heard it read to them. So all the pieces of what John shares fit together. But when we study, we tend to take one text at a time, and often we lose the train of thought. So in a church setting, if you hear a text a week, then it draws out over several months from beginning to end. And that's why it's so important to remember that each text needs to be studied within its greater context. In other words, what does this mean in light of the discussion of this book? I think we all understand; you can make the Bible say anything you want it to say by pulling verses and passages out of their context. That's why reviewing the train of thought all along in the book of John is so important. We've done that today. We'll do more of that tomorrow.