Small Group Study Guide: 1 John

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Though there are many similarities between the Gospel of John and the three letters under the same name, there is one major difference. The purpose of John’s Gospel is that readers would come to “believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The writer of 1 John had a different goal. We read, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). This letter was for believers. Though they had faith in the Lord, they were fractured and in need of encouragement.

We can relate with these early recipients of this letter. When community is shaken and things around us are anything but certain we need to be reminded of God’s truth which is as simple as it is profound: God is light. God is love.

Readers of 1 John should not expect any “new” theology. We are told, “I am not writing you a new command but an old one” (1 John 2:7). In times of crisis and confusion we don’t need to be told new things about God. We need to be reminded of what we know to be true.

Chapter 1 introduces the first core truth in 1 John. God is light. Though surrounded by darkness, we are called to remember God’s character. It will bring us into greater unity with Him, and more connectedness with each other.
Take time now to read 1 John 1:1-10 together as a group and discuss the following questions.

1. As a group, watch the video below (less than 10 minutes long) by The Bible Project on the background and bigger picture of 1, 2, and 3 John. Does watching the video give you a richer understanding of the passage you read? Click here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3QkE6nKylM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3QkE6nKylM) or search “Overview: 1-3 John Bible Project” on YouTube.

2. Reread 1 John 1:2-3. The premise of this letter is the author testifying to his actual experience with Jesus. What is a personal experience you have had with Jesus that has been foundational for your walk with him? Share it with the group.

3. In the 21st century this doesn’t happen as often, but have you ever been in a dark place without a light? When you finally find light, what’s that like? How do you relate this to the simple yet profound statement that “God is light”?

4. What do you think it means to “walk in the light”?

5. Read John 15:1-17 as a group. What similarities do you see between today’s passage and John 15? What clarity do you gain from Jesus’s teaching?

6. What do you think the difference looks like between denying sin and confessing it in real life? Read Psalm 32 for a fuller picture of this.
Chapter 1 of 1 John starts out with a big idea - “God is light.” This might leave us searching for specific meaning or application. We turn a corner with chapter 2 and find some specifics right away in one of the primary reasons this letter was written: “I write this so that you will not sin” (1 John 2:1).

Sin can be an uncomfortable topic for groups to discuss. It conjures thoughts of taboo subjects, painful memories, and enduring hangups. But Jesus did not shy away from talking about sin. Jesus, here called, “The Righteous One,” had no reason at all to shy away from sin. He was the advocate who paid it all on the behalf of everyone sitting in your group tonight. We read today, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

This passage ends with what is probably one of the most summative statements on how we should live as Christians: “Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). Such a simple statement, but it invites us into a lifetime of exploration. The Christian life is marked by continued exploration into exactly how Jesus lived, and how we are to live more like him.
Read 1 John 2:1-6 together as a group and discuss the following questions.

1. Has anyone ever “paid your way” or given you a gift you didn’t deserve? How did it feel? How did you feel and act toward that person after the fact?

2. We read, “We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands” (1 John 2:3). Read Romans 12:9-21, a passage on Christian living. If you are comfortable, share about a command that has been difficult for you to keep.

3. You’ll remember from last week we read, “God is light.” Jesus actually says about himself, “I am the light of the world,” in John’s gospel. Read John 8:1-11. What happens right before he makes this statement? What do you notice about Jesus’s treatment of sin?

4. When you read today’s final verse, “Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did,” what is the first thing that comes to mind? Do you envision yourself doing or saying something? Do you remember a story from the Bible about Jesus? Do you think it’s significant you thought of what you did?

5. If technology allows, have someone play “Jesus Paid It All”. Read the lyrics with the song and reflect on these truths in communal worship.
Within his teaching on God’s messages of light and love, John reminds us that we aren’t learning anything new. God was the same yesterday, as He is today, as He will be tomorrow. The newness these Christian communities were experiencing was the manifestation of God’s original message. The darkness was passing away and true light was shining.

Along those lines, we continue to see more detail of what it means to walk in the light. How are we to treat fellow believers? There is no lukewarm or middleground for John. Hatred for a fellow believer means we are walking in darkness. Love for our brothers and sisters implies we are walking in the light. God is love, and John continues to remind us why and how to walk in His light.

He concludes today’s passage by encouraging the young in the faith and the mature in the faith. God has done, and continues to do, great things in His Church. And we are called to celebrate that in humility.
Read 1 John 2:7-17 together as a group and discuss the following questions.

1. John tells these communities, “the darkness is passing and the true light is shining.” It is especially important to take note of God’s victories in these uncertain times. Where do you notice God’s light outshining darkness?

2. What do you picture when you think of loving your brother or sister? Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-10 as a group. Does your picture change at all?

3. How do we love other Christians we have serious disagreements with? How do we remove hate by generating love for other believers we feel opposed to?

4. The passage today ends with an encouragement to children who are addressed in the beginning of the chapter. The author designates between fathers and young men, or “you who are mature in the faith” and “you who are young in the faith” according to the New Living Translation. If this letter was written to our church today, which category would you classify yourself in? Would it be hard to accept the encouragement?

5. If technology allows, listen to “Jesus Friend of Sinners” and reflect on the lyrics as a group.
What is better: To appear good or to be good? We would all answer it is better to be good, and that is what John is getting at with this whole chapter. If we say we are in God’s light but live in sin (verses 1-6) or hate our fellow believers (verses 9-11) we deceive ourselves. In this passage, John completes these thoughts. He tells us that living in the light means loving the Lord more than the world (verses 15-17).

In addition to watching that the fruit of our lives matches what we claim we believe, John introduces a new concept. We need to guard against false teachers who claim to live in God’s light but are actually operating on unsound principles. John evokes urgency and ups the ante, saying we must not be led astray by antichrists in this “last hour.” Rather than predicting the future, he is generating a sense of immediacy and importance.

Instead of focusing on what these false teachers got wrong, John puts his attention on the parts of the original message that are permanent and true. Whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father. We are promised eternal life. And most importantly, we are reminded again to, “abide in Him.” John literally practices what he preaches in keeping God in first place.
1. Have someone in the group read chapter 2 out loud. If you had to summarize this whole chapter in a single phrase, what would it be?

2. Loving the world can mean so many things that it can be difficult to talk specifically about it. The Message translation puts verse 16 this way: “Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him.” Does this give you a more vivid picture of what John is distinguishing?

3. How can we be on the guard in monitoring our love of the world?

4. The NIV translation implies the false teachers’ message is “counterfeit” (see verse 27 NIV). Counterfeits require close inspection and to be “held up to the light.” How can we practically do this with teachers and messages we hear - especially ones teaching about God?

5. Some commentaries posit that perhaps the disunity and division created by these antichrists was even worse than the doctrinal errors they endorsed (see especially verse 19). How do we have important disagreements without fracturing the community?
Chapter 3 begins by commenting on “what great love the Father has lavished on us.” We have already received the full and complete gift of salvation from the Lord. It makes sense that we would respond in love - love of him, love of fellow believers, and love according to the Spirit He gave us.

John reminds us that if we live by the Spirit we may not be fully accepted by the world around us. In fact, we will likely be persecuted and hated. But we must not retaliate or respond in kind. We are called to walk in the light and respond to God’s command to love.

This is no easy task. John recognizes this and speaks to that concern: Whether our hearts are heavy with guilt and condemnation or whether we feel confident in our running of the race, our aim should be the same: “to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.”
1. Trade off reading 1 John chapters 1, 2, and 3 together out loud. Consider the connectedness and completion of some of the themes we have discussed thus far. What has God been teaching you about His Word and about your life thus far in this study?

2. Verse 3 in chapter 3 says, “All who have this hope in him purify themselves.” The Bible frequently speaks of purification and cleansing. What do you know about these processes in typical life (e.g., purifying precious metals or cleansing grimey dishes)? What does that tell you about spiritual purification?

3. Verse 6 says, “No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.” Do you think this means we are to be completely without sin in our lives? How are we to interpret this verse and others like it from this passage?

4. 1 John 3:13 says, “Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.” What do you think this looks like in daily life? How are we to navigate this dynamic practically?

5. In verse 18 we are told, “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” Given your specific situation what does that look like and what could it look like? Has your reading of 1 John inspired any love in action during these weeks?
As we follow Christ, it remains important to test every spirit. John reminds us of our responsibility to evaluate each teaching against the truth of the Gospel and offers us counsel on how to do this.

This passage begins with John warning believers about “anti-messiahs” and “deceivers” who had broken off from the local house churches he was writing to, and instead were preaching a different message. He is both advising and encouraging believers to take up practices of discernment that are reminiscent of his charge in earlier in this book, “Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). All teachers who are legitimate will share about Jesus and the cross in truth, love others sacrificially and spread love and light in all spheres.

Take a moment, before reading today’s passage, to invite the Holy Spirit to guide your conversation and to give you wisdom in abundance.
1. Re-read John 4:1. The “false prophets” that John is referring to in these verses are a group of Jewish believers who no longer acknowledge that Jesus is as Israel’s Messiah or as the Son of God. Instead, they spread fear and division among believers. What do you think it looks like to test every Spirit? How have you been taught to do this?

2. According to verse 2, we can know that someone is from God?

3. In verse 3, the “spirit of the antichrist” is referring to false teaching, rather than the literal antichrist. Where do you think believers are most susceptible to adhering to false teaching today? In what specific ways might it be tempting to go with the teaching of the world, rather than living life sold-out for the Gospel?

4. Re-read 1 John 4-5 together. According to verse 4, how is it we can know that we have overcome the false teachers? How have you personally experienced this “knowing”—something along the lines of what confuses you about this

5. In verse 5 John says that we can recognize false teachers because they “speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.”
   a. What do you think it means to speak from the viewpoint of the world?
   b. Will Christians ever have views that align with things happening in culture? Why or why not?
   c. What is an example of the world listening to a “false” teacher? What is an example of Christians listening to a false teacher that the world elevates?
6. What are practices you have in place to discern truth? How would you like to grow in this practice?

7. As you close out your time together, take time to watch the 8-minute meditation on Psalm 1 below and staying rooted in God’s word as a way to practice all that you’ve discussed.
   Click here: https://youtu.be/WnrFAX7s_5U or search “How to Become Evergreen - Psalm 1 Meditation by Tim Keller” on YouTube