

First John: Light & Life

Bold Belief In Tough Times: Part 4

Written By
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In his book *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Time*, Os Guinness reminds Christians of just how culturally powerful the lived-out gospel of Jesus Christ is. He gave a copy when it came off the presses in 2014, and I read it immediately to see what I could learn from it as a pastor of a local church. One major take-away appears in chapter 4 which is titled *The Secret of Cultural Power*.

... When followers of Jesus live out the gospel in the world, as we are called to do, we become an incarnation of the truth of the gospel and an expression of the character and shape of its truth. It is this living-in-truth that proves culturally powerful.¹

How true. When the gospel is embraced by faith it moves a person immediately from spiritual death to life, from darkness to light, and from being the Devil's child to being God's child. This personal spiritual transformation is jaw-dropping, to say the least (2 Cor. 5:17). As this sinner turned saint, then, naturally turns to live his life as consistently as he can in the power of that gospel, the people of the culture cannot help but sit up and take note. Some will mock and reject the saint, some will be indifferent, but some will wonder at the person's undeniable transformation for the better. When they, too, move from asking questions about the gospel, to embracing the Lord of the gospel, they are radically changed, and so, too, is society as more people are changed by the gospel and who chose to live by its lofty standards.

¹ Os Guinness, *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Time* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2014), 74.

The Devil, of course, is not amused but alarmed. So, what does he do? He goes straight to the source, the local church, and seeks to infiltrate it with false teachers/believers who can decimate the church by means of creating doctrinal divisions, personality conflicts, and so forth. When this occurs, the gospel's personal and cultural power is stifled, even marginalized.

Realizing this truth and tactic, John, took his battered churches in Asia Minor, which resembled churches in the U.S. in many ways (lack of real love for Christ, doctrinal deviation, hedonism, rampant illicit sexual activity, spiritual apathy, cf. Revelation chapter 2-3), and reminded them in 1 John 2:28 through 4:19 of the power of the gospel to save sinners and the importance of believers to actually live in light of the lofty principles of the gospel. Yes, it is one thing to be positionally saved, and quite another to act saved in a practical fashion each and every day. John knew that the churches would be revitalized and re-energized to save sinners and advance God's kingdom of righteousness as the doctrinally and relationally battered believers would remember the source of their former successes against evil: the gospel of Jesus coupled with a gospel changed life.

His message still resonates with us today because our world is still in the grip of the Evil One (Eph. 2:1-3). Our goal, therefore, is to be bold with the gospel and bold with living in light of the gospel. How are you faring? Has anyone lately been saved because of your word and witness? Do people look at your life and see the characteristics of Jesus all over you? Spiritual renaissance starts when saints are courageous in these two areas. John drives this truth home in chapter 3 verse 7 and verses 10 through 15. Of course, these verses are part of a larger section of John; namely, 2:28 through 4:19, where the pastor addresses and develops a question all saints desire an answer to:

What Does Bold Belief Look Like In Trying Times? (1 John 2:28-4:19)

So far, we have covered seven practical and challenging concepts:

1. Bold Belief Strives For Consistent Obedience (1 John 2:28)
2. Bold Belief Lives In Light Of Who Jesus's Character (1 John 2:29)
3. Bold Belief Lives In Light of Who You Are (1 John 3:1)
4. Bold Belief Lives In Light Of Who You Will Be (1 John 3:2-3)
5. Bold Belief Understands Sin's Nature (1 John 3:4)
6. Bold Belief Understands Sin's Solution (1 John 3:5)
7. Bold Belief Understands The Power Of Intimacy (1 John 3:6, 9)

John adds two more concepts to this list starting in verse 7.

Bold Belief Steers Clear Of Falsity (1 John 3:7-8)

Watch how John develops this salient spiritual truth:

^{NAS} **1 John 3:7** Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous;

^{NIV} 1 John 3:7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

^{BYZ} 1 John 3:7 Τεκνία, μηδεὶς πλανάτω ὑμᾶς· ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην δίκαιός ἐστιν, καθὼς ἐκεῖνος δίκαιός ἐστιν·

The Greek is most instructive. The presence of the negative particle (μηδεὶς) wedded to a present tense imperative (πλανάτω) seeks to prohibit, or stop, an action already in (perpetual) progress. As Dana and Mantey state, “The purpose of a prohibition, when expressed by the aorist subjunctive, is to forbid a thing *before it has begun*; i.e., it commands to never do a thing. But a prohibition in the present imperative means to forbid the *continuance* of an act.”² This is significant for it tells us the Gnostic false teachers had successfully duped some saints with their erroneous teachings about the person and work of Jesus and the doctrine of sin. John’s call is not for the duped to get saved, but to get away from false doctrine and back to sound, true doctrine.

I know you are thinking, Is it possible for a saint to get doctrinally duped? The answer is, yes. Some of these saints were, and so, too, were saints in Galatia and Colossae (cf. Galatians and Colossians. Both locations had their issues with heretical teaching.). Did these saints turn from their faith in God and His Son? No, I don’t think so. As Geisler notes “There are no undisputed scriptural examples of anyone known to be saved who completely gave up his faith in God.”³ What these saints were doing was wedding false teaching to true teaching. Instead of relying on the faith in the gospel to save, they were going back and adding works into the equation. They had received the Spirit, which is clear from Galatians 3, verse 2; however, they were foolishly going back to their old, legalistic ways based on the teaching of a few twisted teachers. Paul’s counsel is for them to get back to the truth of the doctrine of justification by faith alone and the freedom it affords (Gal. 5).

From what John says, it appears the Gnostics taught, as I have said before, that since light and darkness both abide in God (1 John 1, verse 5), a believer could also have light and darkness in his life. You can just hear them, “A little sin isn’t that big of a deal, so go ahead and live a little.” To believers who struggled with the pull of the flesh, as Paul writes about painfully in Romans 7, the new progressive doctrine must have seemed refreshing and freeing. John was not so excited and that’s why he said, “The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.” This countered the Gnostic who must have taught, “You can be righteous even if you don’t live as righteously as you want to.” To John, the believer, who is related by faith to Jesus who is the epitome of righteousness/holiness, should be *naturally* living like their Savior. A righteous Father should lead to a righteous son.

False gospels, like that of the Gnostics, rationalize sin, leaving the way open for believers to enjoy a faith relationship with Jesus while not having to worry that much about their behavior. What false gospel or false teaching has duped you? Our culture has its fair share of them. Take

² H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 301:289-290.

³ Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Three: Sin, Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2004), 285.

what the Presbyterian News Service reported recently that their denomination did to spruce up the old hymn *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise* for the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow.

The climate is changing! Creation cries out!
Your people face flooding and fire and drought.
We see the great heat waves and storms at their worst.
We pray for the poor, Lord — for they suffer first.
We pray for the animals here in our midst
who cannot defend their own right to exist.
We pray for the mountains and forests and seas
that bear the harsh footprint of our human greed.

Ah, this is a far cry from the original:

1 Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.

2 Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;
Thy justice, like mountains, high soaring above
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

3 To all, life Thou givest, to both great and small,
in all life Thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish, but naught changeth Thee.

Some would have us focus on the climate instead of the God of the climate. Why? So we could conveniently forget the real problem is our personal spiritual climate before the Holy God who does not change. All in all, all of this climate talk is yet another false gospel, seeking to dupe the masses and redirect saints away from their true gospel mission. What's the sin? Climate pollution. What's the solution? Repentance of fossil fuels and the embrace of green energy. It's all an ancient ruse the Devil has employed many times before. Has this or some other false gospel duped you away from the true gospel, from your true mission of spreading Christ's gospel?

What happens if you head in the wrong doctrinal direction? Your new doctrinal system, be what it may, will most likely help you rationalize your sinful behavior so you can feel better about yourself. When you start sinning more, and falling out of fellowship with Jesus, John warns you that one thing will be true:

⁸ the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil.

Jesus came to defeat sin and give saints the ability to be victorious over sin (Rom. 6:19; Gal. 5:15-26), not to delve into and rationalize it, as if it wouldn't bother or concern Him. Yet, if you chose to live a compromised life as a saint you will appear to be a child of the Devil, even though he is not your spiritual father. The Lord is. Is this possible? Yes. Consider Peter. When he sought to keep Christ from going to the cross, did not Jesus turn to him and forcefully state, "*Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's*" (Matt. 16:23)? Indeed. Peter never denied Jesus as His Lord, but he did act like the Devil's child when he sought to prohibit Christ's journey to Golgotha.

So, I must stop and ask you one more time. Have you embraced a false gospel/false teaching that is causing you to sin and resemble not God's child, but the Devil's child? Has that false gospel caused you to have a watered-down view of sin? Today is the day to come clean, to say, "I'm not going to be led astray anymore no matter the cost." The day you do this is the day you get back to the true gospel which can, and will, transform not only you but people in your world for time and eternity.

In addition to this concept, John offers yet another:

Bold Belief Lives For Brotherly Love (1 John 3:10-15)

Here John gets to the heart of the matter regarding how to have intimacy with Jesus in your spiritual walk and how to have a profound, lasting positive impact on your relationships, culture, and world.

¹⁰ By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.

While it is true there are radical moral differences between Christians and non-Christians, I am not convinced, as some believe, that John is describing another test to determine to identify either group. If this is a test, then who can be saved? Who is a believer? The only test of who is a believer is whether they believe Jesus was, and is, the true divine Messiah (1 John 5:1). If "practicing righteousness" and "loving your Christian brother/sister" are tests for being saved, then we have a problem because no Christian can claim they nail this consistently.

The saints James wrote to in his letter didn't. He castigated them for showing favoritism toward wealthy people by making sure they found the best seats at church (James 2:2-3). When the poor walked in, they ignored them, leaving them to find less than optimal seats. James minced no words with these bad brothers in Christ:

⁸ If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. ⁹ But if you show partiality, you are committing sin *and* are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all (James 2).

Wow. He took them to task, didn't he? Because these Christian brothers showed partiality to the wealthy, while ignoring the poor among them, they were guilty of breaking all of God's holy

law. Don't tell me Christians can't be guilty of sinful behavior and unloving behavior toward other believers. If you need further proof, just consider how the wealthy Corinthian believers gorged themselves on food and got blitzed on wine during the Love Feast which typically occurred prior to the observance of holy communion (1 Cor. 11:17ff). Talk about unrighteous, unloving behavior. All of the guilty saints in these two church settings didn't resemble being God's children, but the Devil's.

I must stop here and ask you, as a Christian, a personal, probing question: Is there anything you are doing toward another believer which makes you appear to be the Devil's child? How do his children operate? They can be subversive, vindictive, cunning, unforgiving, selfish, thoughtless, mean-spirited, cold, uncaring, and so forth. You guilty?

Why should we work hard at showing brotherly love to other Christians? According to John, it is the command of the Lord:

¹¹ For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another;

Early on, Jesus taught us how we are to behave:

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13).

Brotherly love is a commandment from God, not a suggestion. Did you get that? Additionally, it's a commandment tied, by the Lord, to His model of brotherly love. Wow. That's a tall order, isn't it? We will talk in a moment regarding what His type of love looks like, but for the moment understand that, as verse 35 demonstrates, the Lord's command can either be obeyed or disobeyed by His disciples, His saints. When we obey and love other saints as He did, then the non-Christian world will be able to identify us as His disciples/children. The opposite is true, as well. When the saints in James 2 and First Corinthians 11 failed miserably to show brotherly love, they acted just like the Devil's children. Such should never be the case. *Love should always prevail so the world sees the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

Love, however, doesn't always prevail between brothers. Consider Cain and Abel:

¹² not as Cain, *who* was of the evil one, and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous.

Why did Cain murder Abel? He was envious of the fact the Lord accepted Abel's animal sacrifice, while spurning his offering from his field (Gen. 4:1-5). Obviously, both men had to know that God required animal sacrifice in worship to cover their sins. The fact God killed an animal to cover the nakedness of their parents after the fall in the Garden of Eden had to be known to these brothers (Gen. 3:21). The message was clear: Sin is only covered by sacrifice. Cain knew this, but chose to improvise and bring God some vegetables instead. When the Lord rebuffed him by only accepting Abel's sacrifice, this caused envy to explode in his heart, and once this evil characteristic took over, it wasn't long until he brutally eliminated the object of his envy, his brother, Abel.

From this tragic, sad story we learn several truths about brotherly love.

One, brotherly love is utterly destroyed by internal feelings of sin. Do you have any ill-will toward another believer? Are you jealous of their accomplishments? Are you jealous of what they have as opposed to what you don't have? Are you upset because they got their way and you didn't?

When we moved our California church from the public school to a renovated grocery store, a small committee of ladies drew up plans to decorate the new nursery. After their plans were approved, they painted with a pastel yellow and put up appropriate wallpaper. One wealthy, powerfully Christian lady did not like their proposal, and wasn't happy hers wasn't accepted. So, after these ladies finished their decorating work, she went in on a weekend and stripped the walls and painted them with her color, and she finished the job off with her wallpaper. Shocking, isn't it? What was at the core of the wealthy woman's problem? She didn't get her way, so she was envious and angry, and she let those evil feelings move her to provocative, jaw-dropping, non-brotherly action. Again, I ask you if you have any ill-will toward another believer? If so, confession is in order and maybe personal "I'm sorry" to the object of your scorn.

Two, the brotherly dysfunction between Cain and Abel is, as a sidelight, a perfect description of the way some non-Christians might respond to Christians. Because they hate you, they will oppose you, sometimes to the point of silencing you with death. Knowing this, John gives us wise, wake-up counsel:

¹³ Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you.

Why do they hate you? Here is your Lord's answer.

¹⁸ If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also (John 15).

They hate you because they hated Him first. They hate you because you remind them of Him. You are holy and are not afraid to call sin, sin. You believe in absolute truth, not relative truths. You believe marriage is between a real man and real woman. You believe that all life is precious whether born or unborn. You believe moral truth never changes. You expose their utter hypocrisy and inconsistency. You don't look for clever ways to rationalize sin. And so on and so forth. Their hatred will, therefore, eventually move them to silence you in some fashion so they can continue to enjoy their sin, power, and control. They may deplatform you, sue you, move you off of a board, figure out ways to make your godly stance on issues prosecutable, incarcerate you on trumped-up charges, and even, as in some foreign lands, take you out altogether. Whatever they do, always remember not to be shocked by their hatred.

On the other hand, do be committed to always living like a brother or sister in Christ. It is this brand of selfless love that will arrest the attention of some non-Christians and cause them to consider the life-transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Basically, this is what John is saying in the next two verses:

¹⁴ We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.

Brotherly love shows you are not spiritually dead anymore, but spiritually alive. If you, however, willfully chose, as the one selfish Christian lady did in my church years ago, to act with hostility toward other brothers or sisters in Christ, you are living *as if* you are still under the curse of death. Put differently, your actions make you look more like a child of the Devil than a child of the Lord.

How dangerous are your actions? John minces no words concerning this in his wrap-up counsel:

¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (1 John 3).

If you actually hate another believer, you are really a murderer, much like Cain. John's final clause, I believe, isn't drawing a conclusion and saying, you, therefore, are not saved because no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. David committed murder and was still saved (2 am. 11:15-24). Repentant murderers so, in fact, do go heaven. John's statement is, therefore, like a parenthetical remark denoting the sad spiritual state of one who isn't repentant of his sin. But what is important to note is the heinous nature of brotherly/sisterly hatred is tantamount to murder, which is utterly despicable to God.

So, stop and ask yourself: Do I hate another brother or sister in Christ? Outwardly, do I smile at them, while inwardly I can't stand them and wish bad things on them? If this is where you are at, you, my friend, are far afield from God's design for His Church body. You are also out of intimate fellowship with Him. What do you need to do? Confess this hidden hatred to God and perhaps you might need to even apologize to another Christian as well. Do this and the Lord will wash the hatred from your heart and give you a love that can only come from Him.

Brotherly love which emanates from the life-transforming power of the gospel of Jesus, is the very thing the world needs to see among us so they can come to know Christ's forgiveness. I promised you earlier I would talk about what brotherly love looks like, so now is the time. As we move through this non-exhaustive list, ask yourself, "Lord, does this describe me? If not, why not?"

- I don't do things to purposefully hurt you.
- I present you in the best possible light to others.
- I sacrifice for you, even if you re-decorated the children's nursery I worked so hard on.
- I help meet your emotional, spiritual, and practical needs.
- I welcome your admonition based on facts to grow up in Christ, and you welcome my admonition.
- I squelch gossip about you, and I don't pass on untruths about you.
- I do pray for you.
- I tell you I love and respect you.
- I hurt when you hurt.
- I love you even when you wrong me.
- I forgive and restore you when you humble yourself.

- I really enjoy your company.
- I go out of my way to make your life easier when you have needs.
- I, well, I'm sure you can add a few more things to my list.

Brotherly Christian love, which finds its basis in the great gospel of Jesus our Lord, is the very thing the Lord wants to see in our lives and in our church. It's, also, the very thing this combative, carnal world needs to see in us so they, too, are drawn to the Savior.

It's time for commitment: Lord, forgive me for my lack of Christian love. Give me this day the power to be a loving brother/sister to the saints in my life, yes, even to those who might not like the way I decorate and who think they know better. Yes, Lord, my I love other saints just as you love them: unconditionally and unselfishly.