GOD IS LIGHT

1 John 1:5

Christianity spread throughout the Roman world despite encountering fierce, consistent resistance. Its growth reached a tipping point early in the fourth century when Rome officially legalized the religion and, only ten years later, adopted Christianity as its official religion. Roman emperor Julian (AD 332–63) came to power shortly after Christianity's legalization and adoption and wanted to undermine its rise by reinvigorating Rome's ancient religion. However, his agenda met with resistance that he blamed on Christianity's practice of love. Writing about the attractive power of Christian love, Julian said, *"[Christian faith] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them."*[1]

Julian's frustration echoes John's conviction. John, in 1 John, wrote to address individuals who, like Julian, were trying to undermine Christians (*cf. 1 John 2:18-23; 3:4-10; 4:1-3*). His sharp address of those individuals revolves around two messages that anchor his letter and explain the love that roadblocked his plans.

*"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that **God is light**, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5)*[2]

*"This is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that **we should love one another**" (1 John 3:11)*

We will explore John's two messages over the next two weeks to consider what shape they should give to our lives as people who claim to be Christians.

God is light

John's first anchor – "God is light" – originates in the Bible's opening pages. The account of God introducing light into a dark and disordered world as part of His ordering and life-giving activity sets the stage for the Bible's use of "light" and "dark" as images for God and evil (*Genesis 1:1-4; cf. Psalm 4:6; 104:1-2*). John draws on those long-established metaphors to introduce the first part of his message, exploring for his audience the meaning of God's identity as "light."

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[1] Excerpt From *Church History in Plain Language*. Bruce Shelley (https://itunes.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewBook?id=364637799)

[2] All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

- Because God is light, John wrote, we have an obligation to "walk in the light" (*1 John 1:7*).
    - John gives three specific illustrations of what it means to "walk in the light."
        - Walking in the light means living like Jesus, who embodies God's light (*1 John 2:6; John 1:4-5; 8:12*).
        - Living like Jesus involves keeping his commandments (*1 John 2:3-5*).
        - Jesus' commandments focus on loving one another (*1 John 2:7-10; John 13:34-35; cf. Matthew 22:34-40*).
    - While walking in the light involves requirements that must be met, meeting those requirements makes "fellowship" possible (*1 John 1:5-7*).
        - "Fellowship" (*koinonia, 1 John 1:3, 6-7*), as John uses it, refers to an intimacy shared among people who have received God's forgiveness through Jesus that draws them into a relationship with Him and all other individuals similarly enjoying that relationship (*cf. 1 John 1:1-8*).
        - While fellowship begins with the shared experience of forgiveness, it is maintained by obedience to God through Jesus, by walking in the light (*1 John 1:5-7*).
- Because God is light, we cannot have a relationship with Him if "we walk in darkness" (*1 John 1:6*).
    - Walking in darkness, John wrote, involves loving the world (*1 John 2:15-17*).
        - The world is filled with selfish concerns that do not originate from God and that undermine our relationships with one another (*1 John 2:16*).
        - Because Jesus appeared "to destroy the works of the devil" (*1 John 3:8*), "the world is passing away along with its desires" (*1 John 2:17*). Rather than devoting themselves to things "passing away," John encouraged his readers to focus on the will of God that "abides forever" (*1 John 2:16-17*).
    - John used the "antichrists" troubling his audience to illustrate what it looks like when one walks in darkness and loves the world (*1 John 2:18-3:10*).
        - They deny Jesus' royal, divine identity (*1 John 2:22*).
        - They make "a practice of sinning" (*1 John 3:4-6*); they follow the world's example rather than Jesus' example (*1 John 3:7-8; 2:6*).
        - They do not love their brother (*1 John 3:10*).

Applications

- While Christianity does involve some complicated things, its core is simple – obey Jesus.
- Similarly, obeying Jesus possesses a simple core – love people.
- However, even a casual survey of the Bible, history, or society reveals that people tend to love themselves or things more than they love others. Therefore, ask yourself:

Do I follow the example of the world by orienting my life around career, finances, pleasure, or political beliefs?

Do I walk in the light by obeying Jesus and pursuing intentional, loving relationships characterized by his example of selfless, sacrificial service to others?