

WHAT A FELLOWSHIP!

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter
Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines
Ministries

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Let's Begin

A famous preacher once indicated that God's presence, as expressed by the interaction between Him and us, must always be the overwhelmingly dominant factor in our life. And, any conception of Christian fellowship which does not mean primarily fellowship with Him is out of order. In short, true Biblical fellowship begins with our relationship with God. If we are not His child through our faith in His Son, we can never experience genuine Christian fellowship no matter how many church suppers we attend. The truth is, our fellowship with the Father is the foundation upon which we build fellowship in the body of Christ. Hence, without the proper foundation, there can be no stable structure.

John is particularly concerned that the early Christians learn this vital truth. Therefore, when he speaks of fellowship with other believers, he always assumes there is fellowship with the Father through the Son. As we make our way through chapter three and John's description of Christian fellowship, let's turn our attention to the outline below as our guide:

- I. **The Portraits of the Fellowship (vv. 1-3)**
- II. **The Purity of the Fellowship (vv. 4-9)**
- III. **The Proofs of the Fellowship (vv. 10-24)**

I. The Portraits of the Fellowship (vv. 1-3)

Two portraits of fellowship stand out. First, Christian fellowship from a Biblical perspective begins with our *position* in Christ. John writes, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (vv. 1-3). Being a child of God is a present reality.

Observe John's insistence that we are *selected* by the Father. He has "bestowed upon us" the marvel of His love. Our eternal fortune exists because He made us objects of His eternal love. Indeed the more we learn of

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His love, the more amazing it becomes. In Him, we have an *undeserved* love. It reaches down to us even as sinners and sacrifices for us (cp. Rom. 5:8). The love overflowing from the Father to us is also an *unselfish* love (cp. John 3:16). The Son of God became the Son of man solely so we might become children of the King. In addition, His love is a *unique* love (cp. Matt. 8:27; 2 Pet. 3:11). Christ loves us with an out-of-this-world kind of love. No one loves us quite like Jesus!

Observe also, we are *sighted* by the world. While believers are rejected by the world in which they live and work, they nonetheless have an assured love from the Lord of heaven, an unwavering commitment to sustain them even in the toughest of times. The world did not know Jesus even though they should have (cp. John 1:10-11). He came to His own, but was despised and rejected by men



Reflection Connection

Since we are selected by the Father, what do you suppose God saw in us to choose us? Why would He choose us but not choose another person?

(Isa. 53:1-6). And, being slighted by the world He loved, they drove Him to a cross where He died in the sinner's place. And, just as the world slighted Him, it will slight us as well. But His love undergirds us, supporting us in our difficult moments.

John offers a second portrait: our fellowship continues with our *potential* in Christ (v. 2). Our potential as believers is *anticipated*—"doth not yet appear." One day God will make a public display of all His children. Not only so, our potential is *actualized*—"when He shall appear." Everything God intended for us will be fulfilled when Christ returns. And, the beautiful hope will be realized for every believer—"we shall see him." Presently we only know Him by faith and within our hearts. While it remains beautifully mysterious, we still love Him though we have not seen Him face to face (1 Pet. 1:7-8). Yet the day approaches when we will see Him in person and when we do, we "shall be like him." God saved us not only to have a heavenly home for all eternity. He also saved us to be conformed to the image of His Son. Little wonder our practice changes because our potential in Christ is realized. Our hope remains set on Him.

II. The Purity of the Fellowship (vv. 4-9)

John moves from the *portraits* of our fellowship to the *purity* of our fellowship. He writes, "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law. And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him. Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (vv. 4-9). These verses offer a challenge to us because they seem to imply a person is expected to be morally perfect after he or she believes the Gospel. As we shall see below, however, this is not what John had in mind.

The essence of sin is having things our way.

Let us begin with John's focus on the *provision of the Savior* (vv. 4-5, 8). According to John, Christ's coming—His incarnation—was necessary. No other way existed for human beings to be rescued apart from God coming in human flesh. Why? One word answers the question—*sin*. And, just what is sin? Actually, the Bible offers various ways to look at sin which ensure a better understanding (cp. James 4:17; Rom. 14:23; 1 John 5:17). For John's purposes, he simply says sin is "transgression of the law." To sin is to step over the boundary, God's boundary. Indeed the essence of sin is having things our way. Wanting what she wanted and not what God wanted was at the bottom of Eve's transgression (Gen. 3:1-6).



On the other hand, with Jesus, no sin was found in Him (v. 5). Being the sinless Son of God, He could take away our sin (cp. Heb. 10:7; John 4:34). Indeed taking away our sin was the reason Christ was “manifested”; He came to bear the punishments due us. He took our place on the cross. He died so we could live. And, the only response God requires from us is faith, faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Consequent upon our faith, John informs us our sin has been delivered a death blow—that is, our sins are “taken away” (cp. Lev. 16:8-10; also John 1:29; Heb. 9:26). Every angle—in fact, every trace—of sin has been dealt with through Jesus’ death.

Second, observe the *practice of the saints* (vv. 6-7, 10). We mentioned earlier some are tempted to interpret this passage of Scripture as if John taught the *perfection* of the saints; he was not teaching moral perfection. Not only is moral perfection not consistent with the experience of those who make such a claim, such a teaching ignores other fundamental teachings of the Bible. For example, Scripture clearly teaches the believer possesses two natures—flesh and spirit (Gal. 5:17). The same truth is stated in other terms like “old man” and “new man” (Col. 3:9-10). Hence, the Bible does not teach sinless perfection of the saints. What, then does John teach about the *practice of the saints*? Two clear principles are stated.

The first principle is, *Christians do not make sin a habitual practice*. The tense of the verbs in the original Greek is the key to understanding John’s meaning. For example, the New American Standard Bible (NASB) correctly brings out this particular truth. Rather than “sinneth not,” which could imply sinlessness, the NASB rightly translates the Greek, “does not practice sin.” Saved people may sin and do! However, John is saying those who are saved do not make sin into a lifestyle in which sin is habitually practiced. In other words, sin is the exception not the rule of a believer’s life. If sin is the rule, then, according to John, one is not a Christian.

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The second principle clearly stated is, *Christians do practice righteousness*. Those who are outside Christ habitually do wrong and only occasionally follow moral truth. Conversely, those who are Christians habitually do the right but occasionally stumble into sin. This is the picture John paints of the child of God. How is this possible? Believers inherit a power which the world neither knows nor experiences. Since believers are “born of God,” believers have the power of God (v. 9). John says “his seed remaineth in him.” The “seed” references the new life the believer has in Jesus Christ. Once the Gospel is heard, the Word may be received into the heart which in turn creates a new nature (cp. 1 Pet. 1:23; 2 Pet. 1:4). The old nature can no longer dominate. The process of purity in our fellowship begins.

Before moving on to John’s explanation of the proof of our fellowship, let us observe the Apostle’s acknowledgment of our archenemy, the devil. Jesus was



“manifest” to destroy the works of the devil. Though he was a created being (cp. Ezek. 2:11-19), he is the one who sinned “from the beginning” (v. 8), having corrupted himself through pride and jealousy (cp. Isa. 14:9-17). Consequently, he was condemned (John 12:31) and remains under the judgment of God (Gen. 3:15) until he goes to his final place (Matt. 25:41). Until then, God has chosen in His wisdom to allow Satan some “slack” in his chains. Hence, he uses “devices” and “wiles” against the people of God (Eph. 6:11; 2 Cor. 2:11; 2 Tim. 2:26; 1 John 3:8).

III. The Proofs of the Fellowship (vv. 10-24)

John gives several proofs which demonstrate we have fellowship with both God and others. First, our *actions* remain proof we have fellowship. The Apostle digs back into the history of God’s people to find a worthy illustration. He writes, “For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous. Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you” (vv. 11-13). Murder is the extreme opposite of expressed love; instead, it is expressed hate. Cain demonstrates this when he kills his brother, Abel (Gen. 4:8). Stirred by jealousy over Abel bringing an acceptable sacrifice to God while his offering was considered faithless, Cain slew his brother. Murder is the highest expression of hate against another human being. Hence, John used this illustration as a negative way of affirming that love is the highest expression of fellowship. Another proof of our fellowship is our *attitude* (vv. 14-18). In this section, John describes an unacceptable attitude of the believer which includes malice (vv. 14-15) and miserliness (vv. 1-18). Believers must keep guard over their attitudes.

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Reflection Connection

Take a moment and reflect upon your own life. What proof do you see you have fellowship with God and fellow believers? Be prepared to share with the entire group.

Third, and more on the positive side, John lists a third proof of fellowship—*assurance*. He writes, “And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God” (vv. 19-21). The Greek term translated “assure” means “to persuade” or “to tranquilize.” John insists believers may be assured of their fellowship with God deeply within their heart. Two conditions of the heart are mentioned. On the one hand, he speaks of a *condemning* heart. A heart condemned is a heart which finds fault and always blames. A condemning heart seeks to find fault rather than comfort. On the other hand, John speaks of a *confident* heart. The greatness of God’s character and the infinite supply of His knowledge establishes confidence in the believer. Hence, “before Him” we have the utmost confidence.

Another proof of our fellowship is *answered prayer* (vv. 22-23). John offers a sweeping assertion for the believer who trusts in God through prayer—



“whatsoever we ask.” In essence, John gives us a blank check! If we ask in His name, blessings are promised (cp. James 4:2). Nonetheless, a condition is attached to the promise. What is the condition? One word answers—*obedience*. We must seek to pursue “pleasing” lifestyles to the Lord. Another way to put it is *abiding*. He writes, “And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us” (v. 24). Through our obedience we abide in our Savior. Fellowship is assured; fellowship is proved.

Golden Greek Nugget

John asserts clearly that we if do not love our brother we are “abiding” in death. The Greek term translated “abiding” is *meno*, which carries the idea of dwelling, staying or remaining in a particular place. In other words, hate for our brothers is proof we are not born of God, we are not children of God.

Wrap Up

The relationship we have with both God and believers is almost too much for words. What a fellowship! John paints a portrait of this fellowship in chapter 3. In addition, he shows us how fellowship is purified and fully proved in our hearts. God made us to have fellowship with Him, and that fellowship is most expressed now in the body of Christ.

