

Christ, the Atoning Sacrifice

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 59:1–8
Background Scripture: 1 John 2:1–6; 4:7–21

1 John 2:1–6

1 My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:

2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

3 And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.

6 He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.

1 John 4:9–17

9 In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.

10 Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.

12 No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.

13 Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.

14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.

15 Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God.

16 And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.

17 Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world.

Key Text

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.—1 John 4:10

Costly Sacrifices

Unit 2: Christ's All-Sufficient Sacrifice

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify his or her advocate with the Father.
2. Explain the motivation and significance of Jesus' sacrifice.
3. List three ways to practice 1 John 2:6 in the week ahead.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Surprising Symbol
- B. Lesson Context

I. The Source of New Life (1 John 2:1–2)

- A. Our Advocate (v. 1)
- B. Our Propitiation (v. 2)

II. The Proof of New Life (1 John 2:3–6)

- A. The Test of Obedience (vv. 3–4)
- B. The Model of Love (vv. 5–6)
When You're Snowed In

III. Love in Action (1 John 4:9–12)

- A. God's Initiative (vv. 9–10)
A Modern Propitiation
- B. Our Responsibility (vv. 11–12)

IV. Certainty of Knowledge (1 John 4:13–17)

- A. Divine Intervention (vv. 13–14)
- B. Human Confession (vv. 15–17)

Conclusion

- A. Transformed Reality
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

DocetismDoe-set-iz-um.

EcclesiastesIk-leez-ee-as-teez.

epistlesee-pis-uls.

Gnosticism *Nahss-tih-sizz-um*.

propitiation *pro-pih-she-ay-shun*.

Introduction

A. Surprising Symbol

Today, the cross of Christ is recognized the world over. We see it on church buildings, use it for headstones, depict it in paintings, and wear it as jewelry. The latter is particularly surprising for becoming so common, given that the cross was the instrument of torture and death for notorious criminals in the Roman world. In that era, crosses along roadsides symbolized the ultimate consequence for challenging the Roman Empire's power.

How could such a terrible object become the universal symbol of a faith that preaches love and offers new life? The answer to that question lies in the purpose of Jesus' death on the cross: today's lesson.

B. Lesson Context

Our text comes from two parallel sections of the New Testament epistle designated 1 John. It is one of three letters by John among the General Epistles. This is a section of the New Testament consisting of the eight letters: Hebrews; James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude.

The epistles of 1, 2, and 3 John are not explicitly ascribed to the apostle John by name, yet the early church ascribed these epistles to him, just as they did with the Gospel of John.

The three letters have close connections to the language and themes of the Gospel of John, so it is reasonable to conclude that all came from the same author. In doing so, we carefully distinguish the apostle John from John the Baptist or John Mark (Acts 1:5; 12:12; etc.).

The letter 1 John and the Gospel of John explicitly state that the author was an eyewitness of Jesus' life and ministry (John 1:14; 1 John 1:1–3). These two works of Scripture have similar purpose statements (compare John 20:31; 1 John 5:13). Both purpose statements find their basis in what the readers can "know" as a certainty. This is a distinctive emphasis of the author. He wrote about 14 percent of the New Testament, but his writings feature over one-third of the New Testament's 250 uses of the Greek word that is underneath the idea of "to know" (more on this in the commentary below).

The letter 1 John addresses growing controversies in the first-century church about the nature of Christ and the Christian life. It seems some believers were influenced by a common concept of that day that said all material things are by nature evil, but that which is spirit is by nature good. On this basis, some began to deny that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human. After all, if material things are evil, then it would be impossible for the good God to exist as a human in a body. The letter of 1 John refutes this. Some students see the growing heresies of Gnosticism and Docetism as playing a part in this problem.

I. The Source of New Life

(1 John 2:1–2)

A. Our Advocate (v. 1)

1. My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

The author addresses readers as *children* often (1 John 2:12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). The term suggests a close and affectionate connection between the writer and the original audience. This term might also hint that the readers are either younger or less mature in their spiritual journey than the writer.

The Greek word translated *advocate* here is the same one translated “Comforter” in John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, where it describes the Holy Spirit. Christ’s forgiven people still sin; they recognize as much if they are honest with themselves. When believers sin, they do not require justification once more; instead, as children of God, they receive forgiveness through the intercession of Jesus Christ with the Father. Is forgiveness a one-and-done affair? Is the once-forgiven sinner returned to the life of death on the first failure after forgiveness?

The answer is no, as the author sketches Christ’s ongoing role as an “advocate,” one who speaks on behalf of another. Another way of saying this is that Christ intercedes for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). With God the Father depicted as the righteous judge, Christ speaks on our behalf, identifying us as those whose punishment has already been taken by Christ himself. Christ is *righteous*, meaning He is not guilty of any sin and is entirely in accord with God’s right way.

B. Our Propitiation (v. 2)

2. And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

The keyword *propitiation* now appears in the text. The underlying ancient Greek word is rare in the New Testament. The noun forms appear exclusively here, in Romans 3:25, and 1 John 4:10 (see below) and refer to something that turns away wrath. A verb form is in Hebrews 2:17.

Central to the gospel message is that Christ’s death was the once-for-all-time sacrificial offering that shifted our fully deserved punishment for sin onto Him, who is the sinless one (2 Corinthians 5:21). This doctrine is often referred to as “substitutionary atonement.” Christ’s substitutionary atonement is sufficient for all our sins—past, present, and future. This reality is fundamental; this is grace. It is available for *the whole world*, but it is effectual and operative only for those who receive it through faith in the blood (Romans 3:25–26).

II. The Proof of New Life

(1 John 2:3–6)

A. The Test of Obedience (vv. 3–4)

3. And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

The author uses the verb translated *know* about two dozen times in the five short chapters of 1 John. These mostly affirm the Christian's confident faith in Christ and assurance of salvation. Here, the question is what assures us that Jesus' is indeed our advocate and propitiation when we sin. The answer is that keeping Jesus' commandments is our proof (John 14:15; 15:10). If Jesus is Savior, then He must also be Lord.

But how can one who keeps Jesus' *commandments* also need ongoing forgiveness of sins? The writer uses the stark contrast between ongoing sin and ongoing obedience to capture the nature of the Christian life. As a people habituated to sin, we continue to sin even after receiving the gift of Christ's atoning death. But as people with faith in Christ, we continually submit our lives to His authority. So sin, ongoing in the lives of believers, is continually being overcome. Sin is no longer in control, no longer at home.

What Do You Think?

What steps can believers take to overcome sin and submit to Christ's authority?

Digging Deeper

How has your life changed since you submitted to Christ's authority?

4. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

This verse restates and reinforces 1 John 1:6: "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth." Some believers among John's original readers may have separated faith in Christ from obedience to Christ. Perhaps thinking their "good" spirits were completely separate from their "evil" bodies, they lived as if their actions had no bearing on their relationship to Christ (see Lesson Context). Nevertheless, the contents of a person's heart will eventually become apparent through their actions (compare Matthew 12:34). Therefore, the writer completely rejects the idea that someone's actions would not align with their declared faith.

B. The Model of Love (vv. 5–6)

5. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.

By contrast, our following Jesus' teaching expresses the effect of everything He has done. Jesus' death for sinners was the fullest expression of God's love for humanity, and Jesus' teaching instructs us how to express God's love to others (John 3:15; 1 John 3:16). This makes God's love for humanity our love for humanity. The ancient Greek word translated *perfected* can take various shades of meaning, depending on context. Here and elsewhere, the sense is that of a finished task because its goal has been achieved. The writer uses the word this way five times in his Gospel (John 4:34; 5:36; 17:4, 23; 19:28) and four times in his first epistle (here and 1 John 4:12, 17, below; and in a negative sense 4:18).

6. He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.

To confess Christ means to obey Christ. *To walk, even as he walked*, is to follow His example (John 13:15).

The author fronts this conclusion by introducing a Greek word translated as “abide”; he uses this word 23 times in this letter. In doing so, he speaks of a close, ongoing connection. This image originated from Jesus as He compared His followers to branches connected to Him as the vine (John 15:1–11). The author’s linkage to Jesus’ teachings clarifies that a believer cannot keep Jesus’ commandments or follow in Jesus’ footsteps through his or her own strength. Doing so is only feasible by remaining in Christ and letting God’s Spirit produce fruit in and through the believer. This teaching applies to everyday life. Those who abide in Jesus will inevitably live their life in ways reflecting His love and teaching. In the text between 1 John 2:6 and 4:9 (not in today’s lesson), the author continues to trace the theme of love as it applies to various situations.

What Do You Think?

How can you be better attentive to the work of God’s Spirit to produce fruit in you?

Digging Deeper

How will such fruit empower you to abide in Christ?

When You’re Snowed In

I have a vivid childhood memory of when my family was snowed in by more than a foot of that white stuff. I tried to help my dad dig out. But I quickly encountered a problem: with every step I took, I sank deeply into the snow. I could hardly move. The solution was for me to follow my father’s path as he did the major work of clearing snow.

The challenge to walk as Jesus walked may seem overwhelming. How can we possibly walk in the same way that the sinless, holy Son of God walked? That’s the first step: we admit our weaknesses. The second step is to realize that Christ knows our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15; compare Romans 8:26). While achieving perfection through our own endeavors is impossible, this does not imply that the benchmark of perfection is reduced (Matthew 5:48). We will still sin. However, forgiveness is still available (1 John 1:9). What is the most important improvement you must make in your walk?

—C. S.

III. Love in Action

(1 John 4:9–12)

A. God’s Initiative (vv. 9–10)

9. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.

How can we fail but to see John 3:16 restated here? The supreme expression of God’s love is demonstrated through the incarnation: the divine Son of God putting on human flesh to announce and deliver salvation personally. The description of Christ as the *only begotten Son* emphasizes His uniqueness and value to the Father. The eight other translations of the

underlying Greek word—not always referring to Jesus—are found in Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38; John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; and Hebrews 11:17.

God sent His Son to give life to humanity and thereby allow them to enter the presence of the holy God. Jesus not only accepted and affirmed that mission, but He also narrowed the focus of His uniqueness and exclusivity of mission when He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). Truly, we live only *through him*.

10a. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us.

An astute observation from years ago is that what is unique about the relationship between the true God and people is that pagan religions tell stories about humanity’s search for god(s). In contrast, Christianity tells the story of God’s search for us (Luke 19:10). Christ became incarnate in a world that had rebelled against God (Romans 3:10–12, quoting Psalms 14:1–3; 53:1–3; Ecclesiastes 7:20). His becoming human is an act of love, and His death on the cross brings that love to its fullest measure. “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

The message of the gospel calls us to love God and our neighbor (Matthew 22:34–40). All such love begins with God’s love, expressed and made available through the death and resurrection of the incarnate Christ.

10b. And sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

John aims to convey to his audience that love is an action, not an empty term. He illustrates this by detailing how God demonstrated His love for the world: by becoming *the propitiation for our sins*. The declaration in this half-verse echoes what the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:8. see discussion of this word in commentary on 1 John 2:2, above.

A Modern Propitiation

I wouldn’t have believed it had I not heard and seen it personally. The exact date was May 31, 1989, and I was watching a TV news report on the resignation of Representative Jim Wright as Speaker of the House of Representatives. He was resigning under a cloud of alleged ethics violations.

Near the end of his lengthy speech, he made a statement that amazed me: “Let me give you back this job you gave to me as a propitiation for all of this season of bad will that has grown up among us.” I remember wondering at the time whether the average viewer in the TV audience knew what *propitiation* meant! The man was sacrificing his position in the hope that it would bring the ethics turmoil to a halt.

But notice a key difference: the man was giving up a job to deflect wrath *away from* himself; Jesus gave up His life to deflect God’s wrath away from us and *onto* himself! How should your life change now in realizing this fact?

—R. L. N

B. Our Responsibility (vv. 11–12)

11. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.

This implication of the gospel is unmistakable. After receiving God's love, we must recognize our responsibility to love the same people God loves. We do not need to ask who our neighbor is when hearing the command to love our neighbor (Luke 10:29). God loves all because Christ's death makes atonement available for all (1 John 2:2, above). God loves first and loves those who do not love Him. And so must we who have received His love. Even our enemies are objects of God's love and so must be of ours (Matthew 5:43–47).

What Do You Think?

What are some ways we can love one another just as God has loved us?

Digging Deeper

How do you deal with negative attitudes that prevent you from loving those you might consider unlovable?

12a. No man hath seen God at any time.

Many texts reflect the fact that God cannot be *seen* (examples: Exodus 33:20; John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:16). But in Christ, God became a visible, physical human, so to see Christ was truly to see God (John 14:8–9); the next half-verse expands on this.

12b. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.

The imperative to *love one another* is so important that John uses that phrase five times in this letter (here and 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11–12). This command is a repeated part of Jesus' message (John 13:34–35; 15:12, 17) and stressed by others as well (Romans 13:8; 1 Peter 1:22). As we love others, then our actions make God visible to the world.

Regarding the word *perfected*, see commentary on 1 John 2:5, above.

What Do You Think?

Describe someone you know who excels at loving people. How will you follow his or her example?

Digging Deeper

Who will you ask to be an accountability partner to encourage you as you practice loving others?

IV. Certainty of Knowledge (1 John 4:13–17)

A. Divine Intervention (vv. 13–14)

13. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.

The presence of the Holy *Spirit* expresses a new reality. The Spirit's presence in us gives us the certainty that we are in Christ and He is in us. Christ's promise of the Spirit's presence is a fact for all who are Christians and can be a fact for all who are not yet Christians (John 14:16–17; Romans 8:9–11; Ephesians 1:13; 1 John 3:24; etc.). The Holy Spirit's presence is God's presence. Life in the Spirit is the life of God's love, demonstrating and assuring that we belong to Him through Christ's atoning death.

14. And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.

The beginning of this epistle is a stirring declaration that the incarnate Christ, seen by eyewitnesses, is the basis for the gospel message (1 John 1:1–3). In shorter form, the author now repeats that declaration. By using the word *we*, the author declared he had seen Jesus personally and, therefore, his testimony is that of an eyewitness. The mission of *the Son to be the Saviour of the world* reinforces the same thought of John 3:17.

B. Human Confession (vv. 15–17)

15. Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God.

This verse is a summary statement of the plan of salvation. A doctrinal error often seen is to take such summary statements as being the entirety of that plan. For someone to *confess that Jesus is the Son of God* is good as far as it goes. But remember that demons confess the same thing and are still lost (Mark 5:7; James 2:19). Spiritual maturity (Hebrews 5:12) is required for understanding the entirety of that plan, which results in knowing how *God dwelleth in a believer, and he in God* (compare Acts 2:38; Ephesians 2:8–10; Hebrews 11:6; etc.).

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to someone who claims that they can confess that Jesus is the Son of God but still willfully and intentionally commit sin?

Digging Deeper

What is the relationship between right belief and right actions? How does James 2:14–26 inform your response?

16. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.

The author turns to the imperative of *love*. Christ's life, death, and resurrection fully demonstrate God's love. We can say without reservation that *God is love* (also 1 John 4:8). For us to confess Christ truly means that we love one another. Such love is found among all who genuinely experience the abiding unity with God brought by Christ. Without such love, our confession is empty. With it, our confession is complete.

17. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world.

This is the third time the writer has spoken of perfection with regard to *love* (see commentary on 1 John 2:5; 4:12, above); he will continue to do so in the verse that follows this one. And again, Jesus is our model. These concepts are so foundational that they bear repeating!

What's new here is how it all ties in with *the day of judgment*. The complete love of the Father revealed within us empowers us to face God's judgment confidently. This boldness stems not from our righteous deeds but from our trust in God's mercy to save us (Titus 3:5). The nature of our loving works *in this world* will demonstrate the presence or absence of saving

faith (James 2:14–26). Jesus had much to say about this coming judgment (Matthew 11:20–24; 12:36; 25:31–46; etc.).

Conclusion

A. Transformed Reality

Symbols are intended to be meaningful, but people must acknowledge that meaning for the symbols to have their desired effect. I may know a red light means “stop,” but I will stop at the red light only if I honor its intended meaning.

So it is with the cross. This central symbol of Christianity reminds us of Christ’s death, the saving work He accomplished on it, His resurrection, and the love that motivated every part of His ministry. Our failure to love others will indicate that we don’t honor the symbol of the cross—we betray the cross instead. What can you do to honor the intent of that symbol today?

B. Prayer

Lord God, Your love surpasses our imagination. We are filled with thanksgiving because Christ died and rose for us. Lead us to love one another as You have loved us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Christ’s death for us moves us to a life of love for others.