

1 John 1:1-2:2
Real Fellowship

Good morning, church. For those of you who don't know me, my name is David England and I'm one of the members at GBC Logan.

I'm also a high school teacher at Citipointe Christian College in Carindale where I teach junior History, and Senior Study of Religion and am Head of Christian Formation, meaning I oversee our Christian Studies and Chapel program.

It's my privilege to spend 7 of the next 8 weeks with you working our way through the little book of 1 John. We will have a one week break after four weeks.

This is a series that I originally wrote for our school chapel program, and I was able to preach it at GBC Logan over the Christmas break.

And I'm very happy to be able to preach the series here and give Ps Ben some much-needed time away from the pulpit.

So why don't I just take a moment to pray, and then we can get into it.

[OPENING PRAYER]

1 John is really an amazing part of Scripture, filled with great exhortations to holy living and with wonderful words of encouragement for us as we journey through this fallen world.

And it is my prayer that you find this series to be both of those things: an exhortation to holy living and an encouragement.

But, before we get too far, I want to point out two things about this series right up front:

Firstly, 1 John is a bit repetitive. He covers the same ground multiple times in multiple places and you might find yourself in a few weeks thinking, "Haven't we heard this before?"

If that's what you are thinking...then you probably have!

And I thought about trying to group these repeated ideas together and have a sermon on each one so that we don't feel the repetition, but it seemed to me that if the Holy Spirit inspired John to repeat the same ideas again and again, then we probably need to hear them again and again!

Since repetition is the key to learning, we are just going to move through the book as John wrote it and embrace the reinforcement that the repetition provides.

Secondly, I'm going to be giving you all homework each week! I already told you that I am a teacher, and we like to give out homework!

But I'm doing it for a very specific reason. I don't just want you to sit there and listen – I want you to get up and **do!**

This is an incredibly **practical** book, and John has so much to tell us about **how** we should behave as God's children that I want to make sure each week you have something specific to **do** with what we've heard.

So, let's get started.

And as we are starting a new series, let's spend some time getting a bird's eye view of the book before zooming in on our specific section for today.

Let's start with who wrote it and why.

Author:

As the name suggests, 1 John was written by the Apostle John. This is not John the Baptist, the one who baptised Jesus.

That John was killed by King Herod before Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection – you can read about that in Mark 6.

This John is the one who Jesus called to follow him as a disciple, the John who wrote the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation.

The one who is referred to as "the beloved disciple".

This is John the son of Zebedee who, along with his brother James and the Apostle Peter, was one of Jesus' most trusted disciples.

When and Why:

But why did John write this little letter? And when?

Well, towards the end of his life John has been exiled by the Roman government to a little island called Patmos.

Because of his exile which started around 90AD, John is not allowed to move freely around the Roman Empire anymore, and that means he can't visit the churches, so he is writing to them instead.

John was the last of Jesus' original disciples still alive and his most immediate audiences are the churches in the region of Ephesus in what is today Turkey.

John is the Elder of these churches, their spiritual leader, guiding them through their Christian life – but he has to do it at a distance, by letter, rather than in person.

And this very small little letter, only three and a half pages long, is one of the last things that the Apostle John wrote before his death.

So, that's the when. What about the why?

I think John's statement at the end of the letter gives us a good idea.

Chapter 5:13:

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.

Why did John go to the effort of writing this letter? Why are we going to go to the effort of spending time in it?

Because in it are the keys to **knowing** that we have eternal life. Do you want eternal life? Do you want to **know** that you have it? Then we must read and understand this letter!

And given that John has told us his purpose in writing, I can think of no better theme for our series than this:

Believe in the Son of God and Know You Have Eternal Life

But, before we get into today's passage, let's consider where the early church is at in this time in history.

With only one original disciple left alive, now in his 80s at least, and in exile, the church is in a real transition period.

They need to figure out: who will we listen to now that Jesus and his disciples are gone?

What they are asking is the same question we need to ask ourselves today: who has the authority to speak for God?

One of the problems that John has to deal with is false teachers who have come into the early church community and have begun teaching things that do not line up with what Jesus and the Disciples taught.

Now, if you are like me, whenever you hear the phrase "false teachers" certain people come to mind. Most likely certain televangelists that shall remain unnamed! So we are still dealing with the same issue John's audience was dealing with.

And he wants to make sure that his audience was not led astray by these false teachers and false ideas that were infiltrating the church. And we'll unpack what some of those false teachings were in just a little while.

So, let's get into our passage for today, which is the first 12 verses.

And we will see the theme of fellowship coming through strongly in this section, so I've titled today's sermon "Real Fellowship" and our big idea is that "Real Fellowship requires the Real Jesus and the Real Gospel"

And the passage breaks down like this:

We need the Real Jesus (1:1-4) to lead us to the
Real Gospel (1:5-10) so that we can have
Real Fellowship (2:1-2).

The Real Jesus (1:1-4)

In these opening verses, John tells us the importance of getting our facts right about Jesus – we need to make sure that the Jesus we believe in is the **real** Jesus.

The real Jesus is the only one who can create real fellowship with not only each other, but also with God the Father.

And in vv1-2 John lays out some Tests of Faith, ways of ensuring that your faith is built on the right foundation.

Tests of Faith: 1:1-2

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have observed and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—that life was revealed, and we have seen it and we testify and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—

This might seem like a bit of a strange way to start his letter – no introduction to himself like we are used to from Paul, for example.

He just jumps right in to talking about what he and the other Apostles have seen and heard and touched. But he's doing this for a very good reason.

As I already said, one of the biggest issues the early church faced was a question of leadership and authority. When lots of people are **claiming** to speak for God and to teach truths about him, to whom should we listen?

We should listen to those who have the **authority** to teach, and what John is establishing right here at the beginning is **his** authority to teach as an apostle.

And notice right at the start he says “what was **from the beginning...**”. What he has to teach them is what was originally taught by Christ and his disciples right from the start.

He also says “...what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes...”.

These are the qualifications of a true apostle – someone who actually met Jesus and learned from him firsthand.

When it comes to those who speak with the authority of God you can trust those who actually spent time with him, those who heard Jesus and saw him and even **touched** him – look again at verse 1:

“...and have **touched** with our hands concerning the word of life...”

It seems a bit odd that John would include this – so what if he's touched Jesus?

But it's actually very important to the point John's making because of a very early false teaching called Gnosticism.

Let's have a quick show of hands: who here has heard of Gnosticism or the Gnostics before?

And who thinks they know enough about them to be able to explain their beliefs?

Well, for everyone else, Gnosticism was a worldview that traded on “secret knowledge”, special spiritual truths that few people had access to. The Gnostic leaders were people who claimed to have such knowledge, and thus to be the only source of true spiritual understanding.

And one of the key teachings of Gnosticism was that the physical world is evil and only the spiritual world is holy.

This is not the idea that the physical world **contains** temptations or traps the spiritual person should watch out for – it's that the physical world **itself** is evil.

And this actually undercuts quite a few core Christian doctrines, chief among them the doctrine of the Incarnation. This is the doctrine that we celebrate at Christmas each year, the truth that God became a man in Jesus, taking on human **flesh**.

For the Gnostics, the idea of a holy, **spiritual** being like God taking on unholy, **physical** existence could not be tolerated. How could that which is holy choose to surround itself with that which is evil?

So, they developed this belief called Docetism which teaches that Jesus didn't really have a human body – he just **appeared** to have one.

The Incarnation was just an illusion.

Think for a moment about the implications of that idea.

How much does this matter? Is Jesus having a physical body **really** that important?

Yes!

If I was marking this theology, I would give it a big, fat "F"!

Why? Because if he doesn't have a truly human physical body, then he can't truly be humanity's representative before God the Father. It was humans who first sinned, and it needs to be humans who pay the price for that sin.

This is why Christ is called the "second Adam". When the first Adam sinned, he, by virtue of being humanity's representative before God, brought the whole human race down with him.

And we needed another representative of the human race to raise us up again! So Christ must be truly human.

Further, if Christ doesn't have a truly human physical body, then his sufferings weren't real – they were just an illusion. But Jesus **did** suffer as he hung there on the cross, enduring the Father's wrath and judgement for humanity's sin.

If he doesn't have a truly human physical body, then he wasn't really crucified for sinful humanity. How can you put an illusion to death?

And if he doesn't have a truly human physical body, then he wasn't really resurrected from the dead in victory over sin and death.

The best you could get is what some liberal scholars claim the resurrection accounts are actually about – a **spiritual** resurrection, not a physical one.

But, brothers and sisters – it is not just my spirit that is suffering the effects of sin! And my eternity will not be spent as a disembodied spirit floating around somewhere in heaven! That's not what the Bible teaches.

So, if none of these things really happened then we have no hope at all...and we are still lost and alienated from God.

So, yes – it really **does** matter if Jesus had a physical body.

And John wants the people who read his letter to **know** that Jesus had a real, physical body – John has actually touched it!

John and the other apostles are the ones who saw these things and they are the ones who give the trustworthy testimony about “the word of life”, Jesus, and what he taught and did.

I know I’m labouring this point, but it is so important that we get our facts about Jesus correct, because it doesn’t matter how strongly you believe something – it only matters if it’s **true**!

For example, I could believe with all of my being that this syringe of insulin will help me if I’m having a diabetic attack...but if that syringe isn’t actually full of insulin I’m still going to die!

Belief isn’t enough – the **object** of our beliefs must be true.

So, let’s summarise John’s Tests of Faith:

Is your source of authority trustworthy?

Does it come “from the beginning”?

From those who “have heard...have seen...have observed...have touched”?

If it doesn’t, then put it aside – only an authority that passes these tests can declare to you the truth about the eternal life that Christ revealed to them.

I don’t pass those tests.

Pastor Ben doesn’t pass those tests!

We are not people who have the kind of authority that is needed to tell you what you must believe about God – all we can do is point you to those who have and their writings in the Bible.

And this is why it is so important for Christians to spend time reading their Bibles – this is where the truth is to be found!

And yet, we know that many Christians do not prioritise time in the word.

What kind of Christian are you? Are **you** prioritising time in God’s word?

If you are, then your beliefs about God are being shaped by the true, authoritative source.

But if you aren’t having your understanding of God shaped by the Bible, where are you getting your ideas?

Christian books or movies? The songs we sing each week? Maybe you are just relying on what your parents, teachers or pastor say each week.

Those things are all good and useful...but they aren’t enough!

Your beliefs about God must come **from** his word and must align **with** his word!

It is the only reliable source!

So pick up your Bibles and start reading!

If you aren't sure where to begin, grab a copy of the church reading plan from the back and get moving!

And, in v3 John says that our fellowship with God is conditional upon what he has to teach:

...what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, **so that** you may also have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

Here's is part of John's purpose in writing – so that we who read his letter might have the real Jesus Christ and thus have fellowship with other Christians and ultimately with God the Father through Jesus, who is God the Son.

He wants us to have the truth about who Jesus is, from a reliable source, because it is only through knowing the truth about Christ that we can finally have our fellowship with God restored.

Real fellowship with God can only be attained through the real Jesus.

But John is also talking about a fellowship that we can have with him and the other Apostles and with all Christians everywhere in history!

This is one of the things we celebrate each time we take communion – the unity we have with all believers everywhere through our shared love for Christ.

But this fellowship must be built on a unity that can only be achieved through the authoritative teachings of the Apostles.

Look again at v3:

...what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, **so that** you may also have fellowship with us ...

John is clear – our ability to have fellowship with him **and** with the Father and the Son is conditional on the truth about who God is and what Christ has done.

This is the fellowship of faith – a fellowship that is achieved through uniting around the word of God and the Christ it reveals to us.

And this fellowship is supposed to give us great joy!

Look at v4:

We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

John wants to make sure that those to whom he is writing have this kind of fellowship because it will give him as their Elder and those with him in exile great joy, **complete** joy.

What an interesting thing to say! How will his audience's understanding give John joy? As their Elder, John thinks of these churches like his family – 14 times in this letter he refers to his audience as "children".

I think it completes John's joy in the same way that a parent finds complete joy in having children who are pursuing the Lord.

Parents: can there be a greater joy for you than seeing your kids walking with God?

This joy is not restricted to John - **we** should also take great joy from seeing those around us walking with the Lord.

One of my great joys as a teacher is to see my former students walking with the Lord after they graduate.

And one of the saddest things for me is to those who wander far from the Lord.

Look to your left and your right. Look behind and in front of you. Does it not bring you great joy to see these, your brothers and sisters in Christ, walking with God?

And does it not bring you great sadness to see them stumble?

The fellowship we all share is conditional on a shared understanding of who Christ is and what he did for us, and that understanding comes from the truthful witness of John and the other Apostles and disciples.

But what is it we must understand about God? If we want this fellowship, what is the path we must walk?

The Real Gospel (1:5-10):

In the next six verses John presents the Gospel in a nutshell, and this is the path we must walk if we want to have fellowship with God.

- 1) God is perfectly holy
- 2) Mankind is perfectly **un**holy
- 3) Jesus' death is the atoning sacrifice that creates fellowship between man and holy God

So, let's start with what he says we should understand about who God is.

God is Perfectly Holy

Some of you may have seen this symbol – it's called the yin and yang.

This symbol is all about duality – about how two things go together and need each other to form a kind of balance. It's designed to show us the relationship between things that seem to be opposites.

For example, in some forms of Chinese thought, it shows us that good and evil are two concepts that are connected, forming a balance that is important to the way the world works.

This has become a very popular idea in the west – a lot of people like this idea of balance.

Now, why am I talking about this ancient Chinese idea? Because of what John says in v5:

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

What John says here is the complete opposite of what the yin/yang represents. John says that in God there is **no** darkness, **no** evil, **no** sin. God is not one side of a cosmic scale, the other side of which is balanced out by the devil and evil.

God is pure light, pure holiness, pure goodness – there is no darkness of any kind **at all** in God.

And this is absolutely essential to our understanding of the Gospel.

Since God **is** perfectly holy, what kind of relationship can he have with people like us who are **not** perfectly holy? Even the best, most morally upright human being still sins repeatedly – none of us are perfectly holy like God is.

If there is not even a **hint** of evil in God, how can we who **are** evil be in a relationship with him?

We can't! It's not possible for God's holiness to mix with our unholiness, for God's goodness to mix with our evil.

It can't be done.

The only way that we can have fellowship with God is if we are **perfect** just like him.

But we are not.

Man is Perfectly Unholy

Let's read v6:

⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Many people claim to be in fellowship with God – not just Christians, but Jews, Muslims, Mormons, Hindus and other religions. But John is saying that if we claim to have that relationship, it will be seen in our lives.

If with our **words** we claim to have fellowship with God who is light, but with our **actions** we show that we are actually walking in darkness, we are liars. Plain and simple.

And every one of us walks in darkness.

It's possible there are some here today who don't think they are all that bad...but think of it like this:

Too often we fall into the trap of comparing ourselves to terrible figures from history like Hitler and we say, "I'm not that bad!"

But the correct comparison isn't "am I as bad as Hitler?"

It's "am I **perfect** like Jesus?"

Can anyone here claim to pass **that** test?

No!

Look at v8 where John says:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

And he says it again in v10 just to make sure we don't miss it:

If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

If you are honest with yourself, you know this is true. You know you lie, and steal, and hate, and lust...the list is endless.

And so far this is all bad news! Man is unholy – bad news! God is holy – bad news! Where's the good news?

Look at v9, which I skipped a minute ago:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

That's the good news right there – that promise! We are **un**faithful and **un**just – Christ is faithful and just. We are **im**pure and **un**righteous – but he will purify us and make us righteous!

He can put us on the path of real fellowship with a holy God because of his blood, because of what he did when he died for us.

Look back at the end of v7 again:

... the blood of Jesus, his Son, **purifies us** from all sin.

So God is perfectly pure and holy...and through the blood of Jesus we can have fellowship with this pure and holy God because Jesus makes us pure.

This is the real Gospel, and it is built upon the work of the real Jesus.

Look back at v5 in your Bibles and listen as I read from the Gospel of John, also chapter 1:4-5 – hear the similarities:

4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The Gnostics got it wrong – God isn't too holy to interact with our fallen world.

Instead of abandoning us to walk in the darkness we created, the God of light wrapped himself in real humanity and stepped into the darkness of our world, shining the light of the Gospel.

And it is only by following the light of the real Gospel that we can have real fellowship.

Real Fellowship (2:1-2):

But what does real fellowship look like?

Look at chapter 2 v1:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

John says that the outcome real fellowship with God is a changed life. He says that we should not continue to sin – we should “walk in the light, as he himself is in the light” as v7 says.

And this is really important – once we become Christians, we must follow our Lord and Master’s directions. And we do this as he helps us to live holy lives. This is the major theme of the next section, so I won’t go into depth on it here.

But John also knows that we will continue to fail as we go through life, so he points out that when we do, we come back to Jesus because Jesus is our “advocate with the Father”.

John is saying that when we sin, we have Jesus standing like a lawyer before God the Father, who is the judge of the earth, defending us. That’s what it means for him to be our advocate.

And how does he defend us? Does he just...explain away our actions?

“Yes, your honour – the accused did say that hateful thing about that student, but did you see how that kid was behaving? He deserved it!”

Is that what Jesus is going to say to defend me?

No...here’s what Jesus will say:

“Yes, the accused did say that hateful thing. Yes, he does deserve to be judged for that. No, there are no excuses for what he did – he is guilty.

So far, not much of a defence...I should probably start looking for a new barrister, right?

But he’s not going to stop there:

“But! I’ve already taken his punishment when I hung on the cross. There is nothing left for you to punish.”

And the Father, the righteous judge, the one in whom there is no darkness or evil...will welcome me into heaven. Not because of what I’ve done, but because of what Christ has done.

Look at chapter 2:2:

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Christ's death on the cross is the only thing that can bring sinful humanity back into real fellowship with God. His death is the only thing that can save us from hell.

Many people think it's unjust for God to send people to hell, but it would be unjust for him to let people go!

Think about it this way – if some human judge at the court down the road just let a criminal walk free, wouldn't we say that judge is 'unjust'?

How could he allow evil to walk free and still call himself just and honest? He couldn't.

And neither can God – God's justice demands that evil be punished...

So this is the outcome of our fellowship: Christ becomes our 'atoning sacrifice', as v2 says.

Every other religion says your salvation is up to you and your efforts...so you better work really hard!

But the Gospel says that Christ did...we just receive his gift.

Let's pause for a moment and reflect on this amazing truth.

When you think about fellowship with God, what goes through your mind? Is it a checklist of all the things you need to do to be accepted?

Are you thinking about how often you've read your Bible this week? Or how well you've obeyed the various commands in the Bible?

Or are you thinking about how you've treated others, and what that says about you?

When you examine your life, is your conscience troubled by what you find?

Or is your conscience at rest?

The one who is trusting completely in the finished work of Christ for salvation can and should have a conscience that is at rest because it is relying on what Christ did, not on what you've done.

How's your conscience?

Will you let Jesus pay for your crimes before God? Will you find peace?

Or will you insist on trying to pay for your sins on your own?

If you haven't yet accepted this free gift...will you?

Without Jesus to speak in your defence, the conversation before the judge is missing that last line – it just ends with “guilty.”

Don’t delay – you might think you’ve got decades of life left ahead of you, but you don’t know that.

Today salvation is offered to you –it might not be offered to you tomorrow.

If you haven’t already done so, and you are ready to accept the real Gospel and put your trust in the real Jesus – to begin walking the path of real fellowship with God, please come and talk to me.

I’ll be here once we’re finished – and we will be finished in just a few minutes.

Don’t lie to yourself – we all know that we need Jesus and his forgiveness. Come and talk to me – I would love to introduce you to the one who gave his life so that you don’t have to.

Now, I said at the start that I would have homework for you each week, and here’s this week’s.

I know it’s been decades since many of you had to do homework, so I’ll make this first assignment very simple:

Read 1 John. You can read this whole letter in about 20 minutes, and I want you to read the whole thing each week.

I’ve already said that I don’t have the authority to tell you what God expects – I can only read this text and do my best to explain it. The authority comes from John and ultimately from the Holy Spirit under whose influence John wrote.

That means you need to do more than just listen to **me** each week – you need to listen to **John**.

So – I want you to read the whole letter each week – Saturday night or Sunday morning, read the whole thing so that it is fresh in your mind each sermon.

And as you do, as you become more familiar with John’s words, I want you to evaluate what I’m saying as I explain the text against what John says.

Our fellowship with God is dependant on the truths we see in his word – and you need to know what they are!

And as you read this week, look out for John’s various “tests” – he lays out various tests by which we can evaluate the reality of our fellowship with God. Look for them, and over the next weeks we will unpack them.

Most of us hate taking tests, but I can tell you as a teacher that tests are incredibly important and useful.

They help us to track our progress – and as painful as they can be to take, if we don’t we will never be able to know how we are progressing.

So look for John's tests. Start thinking about how you might go.

Let's finish where we started today, with John's statement of purpose from chapter 5:13:

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.

Spend time in this letter each week – believe in the name of the Son of God and **know** that you have eternal life!

Know that you have the real Jesus.

Know that you've believed the real Gospel!

And know that you have real fellowship with God.

Let's pray.

Closing Song: *Before the Throne of God Above*

Has great reminders of Christ as our advocate before God's throne.

1 John 1:1-2:2
Real Fellowship

The Real Jesus (1:1-4)

1. Why is getting the “real” Jesus so important?
2. Who can be trusted to teach us the truth about Jesus?
3. What are John’s “Tests of Faith”? (Hint: see vv1-2)
4. Why is it important to know that John has actually touched Jesus? (Hint: which ancient heresy was discussed in the sermon?)
5. What implications are there for Jesus **not** have a real, physical human body?

The Real Gospel (1:5-10)

1. Why is it so important that we get the Gospel right?
2. What are the basic elements of the real Gospel?
3. Why is God’s **perfect** holiness so important?
4. We often like to compare ourselves to evil historical figures...why do we do this? To whom should we compare ourselves?
5. How can v9 give you joy?

Results in Real Fellowship (2:1-2)

1. What role does Jesus play on our behalf before the Father?
2. How will he do that job? (Hint: see v2)
3. Should a Christian’s conscience be troubled or at rest?
4. What can give our consciences rest?
5. Have you done your homework?