

Chapter 1 described Christians inwardly and outwardly.

By definition, Christians are people who believe that eternal life is found in Christ (1:1–2). They have fellowship with God, the Son, and other believers (1 Jn. 1:3, 7). Also, the blood of Jesus cleanses them from all sin (1 Jn. 1:7), and they are forgiven and cleansed of all unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1:9). However, they are also people with changed behavior; they walk in the light (1 Jn. 1:7) and are characterized by confession when they sin (1 Jn. 1:9).

By contrast, those who are not saved do not believe life was incarnated in Christ; they do not have fellowship with God and other Christians; they do not have the truth in them. They walk in darkness and are self-deceived, saying that God has little concern about how people live (1:6), or they deny sin in their lives altogether (1:8, 10).

The proper application of chapter 1 is to continue believing in Jesus, confessing sin, walking in light, and trusting in God's provision in Christ for our sin. But the ultimate purpose behind John writing these things is to encourage believers not to sin.

**2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;
2:2 and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.**

John's purpose in writing 1:5–10 is now stated: I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. In 1:5–10 John listed a number of ways that sinning was possible and denied any claim of sinlessness; however, in 2:1 he makes it perfectly clear that we should not sin. John has already established that a believer is characterized as walking in the light; in 2:1 the (aorist) tense of the verb "sin" (ἵνα μὴ ἁμάρτητε) suggests that he is writing so specific acts of sin would stop as well (Brooke, 23).

Perfection is impossible but sin is intolerable. God's purpose for our lives is that we might be made like His sinless, spotless Son. Romans 8:29 says He predestined us to become conformed to the image of His Son. God doesn't want us to be a spiritual contradiction; He wants us to be free from sin, run from sin, and hate sin. He also wants us to have confidence that when we sin, we have (a present continuous tense) an Advocate.

"Advocate" (παράκλητος—*parakletos*) is a term that describes anyone called alongside us, to stand by us, and to assist us. In 1 John the word refers to Jesus, but the word is translated as comforter (or helper) in John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7 where John used it of the Holy Spirit. Any one translation cannot capture the breadth of how *parakletos* is used. In the comprehensive sense of the word it refers to someone who helps no matter what the specific nature of the aid may be.

In 1 John 2:1 the picture is a legal setting. As Hodge says,

. . . the guilty, the ignorant, the friendless, when arraigned before a tribunal of justice, need above all things an advocate; one who will undertake their cause; present a plea in their behalf; and use all his influence to secure their acquittal; it is in this sense especially that Christ is set

forth as our παράκλητος. He is our advocate. He appears at the bar of God for us. He pleads our cause. He presents His work of obedience and suffering as the ground of our justification. He exerts His influence, the influence of His character as the Son of God in whom the Father is ever well pleased, and whom He hears always, as well as the influence due to Him in virtue of the covenant of redemption, and the perfect fulfilment of its conditions, to secure for His people all the good they need (Hodge, Systematic Theology II, 593).

Though Jesus is our Advocate, He does not plead that we are innocent. Rather, He comes as Jesus Christ the righteous, the one man who has the right to be in the presence of God. He acknowledges our guilt and presents His vicarious work as grounds for acquittal; “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins” (2:2).

Propitiation is the acceptance of a compensatory payment by a wronged party, by which his anger against the one who has injured him is soothed (Morris, Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, 146). In relation to God, it means to turn away the wrath of God by means of an offering.

Propitiation is necessary because God responds to sin with wrath and judgment. In the OT, one of the ways that God’s wrath could be avoided was through the sacrificial system. John now describes how the wrath of God can be averted in Christ. Men can avoid God’s wrath because the death of Jesus was accepted by God as propitiation. In other words, the death of Christ was a sacrificial act that made God propitious (favorable) toward the sinner. When the wrath of God for our sins was poured out upon Christ at the cross, it was averted from us (see Morris, 184–202 for a detailed discussion).

Normally, with propitiation the offender offers a payment to gain the favor of the one who was offended; in this case God is both the offended party and the One who offers the payment. That is, God Himself sets forth the sacrifice that satisfies His own sense of justice. It was not that Christ came and by His propitiation secured for us the love of the Father; it was the love of the Father that sent forth Christ as the propitiation for our sins. 1 John 4:10 says, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” However deep and dark and shameful our sin may be, we need never to despair. We need to glory in the cross and remember that Jesus Christ the righteous is the propitiation for our sins.

Thus, the Father’s provision for the sinning Christian is His Son, who possesses three qualifications: His righteous nature, His propitiatory death, and His heavenly advocacy. He could not be our advocate if He had not become our propitiation, and He could not become our propitiation had He not been righteous (Stott, 82, 84).

John says that Christ is the propitiation for our sins and *also for those of the whole world*. In John 6:51 Jesus said, “the bread also which I will give *for the life of the world* is My flesh.” What do these verses mean? We know that this does not mean that everyone in the world will be saved or John would be contradicting what he just said in 1:5–10. Belief is necessary to receive life.

- John 12:46–47 “I have come as Light into the world, so that *everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness*. If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.”
- John 3:16–18 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that *whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life*. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. *He who believes in Him is not judged*; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

Thus, some conclude that Christ’s propitiation for the whole world means that Christ’s death is *sufficient* for the whole world although it is *only applied* to those who believe. That is true in itself, but probably not what is intended here. It more likely means that Christ’s sacrifice is universal in scope; that is, there is no race, nationality, or any other trait that will keep that person from receiving the full benefit of Christ’s propitiation when they come to faith (Jobes, 80: Smalley, 40). Christ’s work as Advocate is not just “for our sins” but for all who believe.

In 2:2–11 John focuses on the connection between knowing God and obedience to God. Once again (as in 1 John 1) John’s dualistic way of thinking surfaces; there are only two categories that people can be in: either they know God and keep His commands or they are liars and the truth is not in them; they either abide in the light and love their brother or they are in darkness.

Stott’s introduction to 2:3–27 (p.89) is excellent. He says:

So far John has given a general introduction to his theme of Christian consistency. He has been defining the nature of the apostolic proclamation concerning the word of life in Christ. It centers first on the historical manifestation of the Eternal, and secondly on the fact that God is light. These two truths are fundamental and must control and condition our lives if we call ourselves Christian. Indeed, all Christian profession may be judged in relation to these truths. No thought or action can be condoned which is inconsistent either with God’s nature as light, pure and self-giving, or His historical, palpable self-disclosure in Christ.

2:3 By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.

2:4 The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him;

2:5 but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him:

2:6 the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

“By this we know” introduces a new idea—how believers can know that they know the God of light (1:5). The verb tenses are significant.

- **By this we know** = present tense = we know now

- **that we have come to know Him** = perfect tense = we have come to know Him in the past and that knowledge continues
- **if we keep His commandments** = present tense and conditional “if” = habitual keeping of God’s commandments is the condition of our assurance that we know God

Obedience to God’s commandments is not the same as being under the law; it is submission to the Holy Spirit’s leading in the things of God. It is the fruit of a transformed life (Gal. 5:22, 23). Knowledge of God involves much more than keeping His commandments, but there is no real knowledge that does not result in obedience. In the Bible, knowledge is never a purely intellectual process. It is acquired by the exercise of all the faculties of intellect, heart, and will (Brooke, 29). The reality of knowing God is confirmed moment by moment in the course of life. It is to be in vital fellowship with Him, to love Him, to fulfill that relationship toward Him for which we were born (Westcott, 46).

The positive principle of verse 3 is illustrated by a negative example in verse 4: The one who says, “I have come to know God” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

The man who claims to know God but doesn’t carry it out by following His will is a liar (Brooke, 30). “To be a liar” does not just mean that he lies in his speech, it is to be in a permanent state; that is, his entire person is a lie. “The whole character is false” (Westcott). In a similar way the truth is not just something cognitive, but considered as an active principle working in the man. It corresponds with the whole nature (Brooke, 31) and issues in behavior (see notes on truth for 1:6).

Love for God has been perfected in the one who habitually keeps (present tense) God’s commandments. God demonstrated His love to Christ by revealing His will to Him; Christ demonstrated His love for God by perfectly obeying His revealed will (Jn. 5). Our love for God is not expressed in sentimental language or mystical experience but in moral obedience (1 Jn. 2:5; Jn. 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10).

In 2:6 keeping God’s commandments is given specificity. The one who abides in Him (that is, God), walks as He (Christ) walked. As Brooke says, “the test of union with God is the imitation of His Son” (Brooke, 32).

***2:7 Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard.
2:8 On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.***

Verse 7 introduces a new unit of thought. There is both a continuity and discontinuity with the past.

John says, “I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard.” He does not specify exactly what the new commandment is.¹ However, since the commandment to love one another immediately follows, it seems likely that this is what John has in mind (2:9–11; Brown, 264; Stott; 92). Verses 7 and 8 prepare us for verses 9–11.

John often speaks about loving one another and the connection to loving God or knowing God.

- John 13:34–35 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.
- John 15:12 This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
- 1 John 3:11 For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.
- 1 John 3:23 This is His (God's) commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He (God) commanded us.
- 1 John 4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.
- 1 John 4:10–11 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
- 1 John 4:20–21 If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him (God): whoever loves God must also love his brother.
- 2 John 1:5–6 Now I ask you, lady, not as though I were writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning, that we love one another And this is love, that we walk according to His (God's) commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.

A number of things are said about the commandment in 1 John 2:7–8:

- In some sense the commandment is both old and new.
- John's readers had it from the beginning.
- It is the word which they had heard.
- The new commandment is true in Him and in you.
- It is new because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining.

The amount of discussion given to these specifics cannot be overstated. The following is just one of many interpretations, but it must be kept in mind that almost every observation is disputed.

In what sense is the commandment both old and new?

1. How the commandment is old.

The commandment to love one another was rooted in the OT (Lev. 19:18): "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus called this the second greatest commandment and foundational to the entire OT law (Matt. 22:39–40). However, in John 13, Jesus introduced loving one another as a new commandment. He said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (Jn. 13:34–35; Brown, 264; Brooke, 34). If the command to love others was already prescribed in the law of Moses and recognized by Jesus, how could it be considered new? The newness was not in the command per se but in the fact that Jesus invested it with a deeper and richer

meaning (Stott, 93). Christ loved to the point of giving His own life for others. In John 15:13 Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” The new commandment is that we are to love one another *as Christ loved us*. That is, we are to love each other in the same manner and measure that we are loved by Christ.

However, 1 John was written years after Jesus gave the “new commandment,” so even the “new commandment” had become relatively old information to John’s readers. It was well established in Christian thought; as John says, “I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment.” You know it; you have had it from the beginning.

John’s readers had this commandment from the beginning.

Although it is difficult to specify what beginning John is speaking about, it seems that in the context it means that the message to love was part of the ethical instruction received from the day of their conversion (Stott, 92; Akins, 96).

John’s insistence that believers are to love one another (2:9–11) is not something novel. It was not his invention. His readers knew this from the very beginning of their Christian experience.

The commandment is the word which they had heard.

If there was any confusion, it is now gone. The commandment is the word they heard from those who shared the gospel with them.

So, verse 7 explains why the commandment is not new. It is not new because John’s readers already heard it from the very beginning of their Christian experience.

But then in 2:8 John says, “On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you. . . .”

The new commandment is true in Him and in you.

- The new commandment was true in Christ; He exemplified it.
- The new commandment was true in His followers who lived it out through obedience.

The truth of the commandment finds application in Christ and in Christians. It applies to both of them.

2. How the commandment is new.

The commandment is new (and it is true in Christ and believers) “because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.”

It is debated what *the true light* is. Some say it is Christ (Jn. 1:9; 8:12; 9:5). This is reflected in some translations by their capitalization of “light” (NAS). God is Light (1 Jn. 1:5), and He has come into the world in the person of Jesus. However, the light must be broader than Christ to embrace both God (1:5) and whatever belongs to His kingdom. “Darkness” and “light” are opposites. Darkness does not refer to a person, so it would seem that “light” would be not be a person either. In addition, “passing away”

reappears in 2:17 where John says, “the world is passing away along with its desires.” If darkness is the darkness of the world that is passing away, the natural antithesis would be the light of the coming world—the kingdom.

Through Christ’s inauguration of the kingdom God rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son (Col. 1:13).

Because the light is already shining, the children of light are displaying the new commandment which is characteristic of the new age. Or to state it differently, because the kingdom of God is pushing back the gates of darkness we see believers walking in love.

Therefore, the commandment to love one another is new because it is the characteristic of the new age and seen in believers.

2:9 The one who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now.

Verse 9 introduces a claim of someone who says they are in the light and yet hates his brother. It is significant that he does not say, “Whoever says he loves his brother lives in the light”; John is concerned with action, not words, that may not correspond with reality (Marshall, 132).

The “light” imagery is picked up from the end of verse 8 and from chapter 1 where God is described as light (1:5).

To be in the light (2:9) or to abide in the light (2:10) is to be in the sphere of God (1:5), Christ (Jn. 8:12), and the kingdom. “Light is that which illumines the moral and spiritual spheres. In virtue of such ‘light’ it is possible for men to go forward in moral duty and spiritual growth, just as the light of the sun makes it possible for them to walk on the earth’s surface without stumbling or tripping” (Brooke, 38).

The person who professes to know God and abide in God but hates a fellow Christian is in darkness. The true Christian both obeys God and loves others. The genuineness of his faith is seen in his right relationship between God and man (Stott, 94). It should be noticed that loving one’s “brother” focuses attention on love within the community of believers; however, the intent is not to exclude unbelievers, rather, it is simply that John is focusing on “family” matters.

Verses 10 and 11 give the general principle stated first positively and then negatively. John is constant with his stark categories. There is only light or darkness, love or hatred; there is nothing in the middle.

2:10 The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause for stumbling in him.

2:11 But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Verse 10 presents itself with an interpretive challenge. The verse ends, “there is no cause for stumbling in him.” “In him” was an interpretive decision. The pronoun (αὐτός) can be either masculine (him) or neuter (it). If it is masculine it means that the person has nothing in him that would cause stumbling. If it

is neuter the resultant idea would be that the one who abides in the light does not stumble because there is no cause for stumbling in light (*it*). The latter idea would be similar in thought to John 11:9–10: “If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him” (Akins, 99).

A second problem is whether “there is no cause for stumbling” means that the person in the light doesn’t cause others to stumble, or the person in the light does not himself stumble. Normally in the NT stumbling is used of making others stumble. So is John saying that the person walking in darkness causes others to stumble due to his lack of love? This is probably not what is meant for a number of reasons. First, verse 11 provides the negative side of the statement. The person in verse 11 stumbles because he does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes. Furthermore, “The effect of love and hate on the man himself is the subject of the whole passage. The sphere of moral and spiritual progress or decline is regarded as being within himself. The occasions for falling are within” (Brooke, 40). Because of this, it is also probably better to see verse 10 saying that the one who abides in the light does not stumble because there is no cause for stumbling in *it* (the light); the darkness causes people to stumble because they cannot see.

The man’s moral and spiritual state affects his conduct. In verse 11 one’s state of being (being in darkness) is seen in outward action (walking in darkness). It’s one thing to be in the darkness, it’s another to walk in it. In the dark one’s life lacks direction; his walking is aimless. The darkness has blinded his eyes.

Hatred reveals that we are in the darkness and the inability to see impedes positive progress; the person in darkness drifts further away from the light because he cannot see where he is going. The possibility of loving others and knowing God becomes even more remote.

As Akins says,

In a real sense what we do is what we become. How we live is who we are. The longer one remains in the realm of darkness, the more difficult it becomes to see the sin that is in one’s own life. . . Habitual hatred leads to more hatred, and the possibility of loving becomes less and less likely (p. 100).

In sum, our love or hatred reveal whether we are in the light or the darkness. A man walks in that which he is. The darkness in which a man has chosen to abide deprives him of the means of sight by which he can direct a straight course (Brooke, 40). If you love your brother, you will not stumble. Love allows the believer to see clearly as he is walking in the light.