

Sermon Series: Flourishing Fellowship with God: A Study in 1 John

Sermon Title: Flourishing Fellowship Harbors Life in Christ's Light.

Scripture: 1 John 2:12–27

Opening Image: Cargo ships

Need: Knowledge regarding true fellowship

Subject: Three Marks of True Fellowship

Biblical idea: Christological clarity in the church separates it from the world for true fellowship in the anointing of the Spirit & Scripture.

Outline of the Text:

- God matures true fellowship in community (2:12–14).
 - The verbs used in this section:
 - A shift in verbal aspect or point of view occurs between verses 12–13 and verse 14. In the first three instances of “I write,” John expressed an insider’s viewpoint of the ongoing walk in the light. In the second three instances of “I write” or as some translations have “I have written” or “I wrote,” John expressed himself as one observing the readers’ walk in the light.
 - Also, the verbs for “forgive,” “know,” and “conquer” in verses 12–13 convey the perfect aspect, which typically refers to a completed action in the past with ongoing results. An author may intend to emphasize either the completed action or the ongoing results. The NET Bible translates in a way that understands John’s emphasis to be on the completed result. The ESV translators only emphasize the completed action with the young men’s conquering. With the little children’s forgiveness and knowing, they emphasize the ongoing results, and with the fathers’ knowing, they also emphasize the ongoing results.
 - It is a difficult decision. In the letter, John assured the readers of the completed works of God in the past and gave them confidence in the persistence of these works in the present during their discouragement. A clue may be that in this section, John does switch to the present when he wrote about the young men’s strength and abiding in the word. Therefore, his switch to the perfect in the other verbs may suggest an emphasis on the completed action of the past—all pointing confidence they should have in the cross of Jesus Christ from which comes forgiveness, true knowledge, and conquering power for the walk in the light.
 - The question of the identity of those addressed in verses 12–14:
 - Are we to take the designations of “children,” “fathers,” and “young men” literally as representing different generations of men in the believing community?

- Or are we to take them as functioning representatively for groups in various stages of spiritual maturity?
- Since “little children” is used throughout 1 John for all of the readers, Judith Lieu offers this interesting arrangement: the “little children” represent the whole church, and within the “little children,” there are some “fathers” and some “young men.”¹
- Lieu suggested that John’s “threefold pattern echoes the standard categories of age and of participation in civic life in the ancient world . . . Philo, for example, lists seven stages, each of multiples of seven years: the little child (*paidion*: to age 7), the child (*pais*: to 14), the youth (*meirakion*: to 21), the young man (*neaniskos*: to 28), the man (*aner*: to 49), the elder (*presbyteres*: to 56), and the old man (*geron*) (*On the Creation of the World* 103–5). The three categories of 1 John 2:12–14 would be a natural simplification of this scheme, and in identifying the characteristics of each group the author exploits the conventional expectations associated with them. Like this passage, Greek divisions of the ‘ages of man’ were not interested in women since they would not grow up to play their part in the life of the city.”² She argues for John’s adaptation of this model for two other reasons. First, the household model for addressing the congregation normally mentions women, slaves, and masters in addition to children and men. Second, the ecclesiastical model found in the pastoral epistles typically mentions older women and younger women.
- Therefore, while John could have pulled from various models for encouraging and assuring the church, he chose a commonly recognized model used in ancient world, adapted it to a threefold pattern, and directed his exhortations toward the men specifically. For this reason, I think Lieu’s suggestion of the “little children” representing all the believers followed by specific exhortations toward “fathers” and “young men” within the congregation offers the best way of understanding this section.
- John assured the “little children” with confidence in the forgiveness of their sins.
 - The title frequently encompasses all believers/readers in John’s writings (vv. 12, 14a).
 - John 13:33 – The Twelve were called little children in the context of them not being able to follow Jesus where he was going.
 - 1 John 2:1 – The readers, without distinction, were called “little children.” They are capable of not sinning, but if they sinned, they had an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous one.
 - 1 John 2:12 – Here, in our text today, they have been forgiven (extensive perfect, a completed past act that created a state that extended into the present) for the sake of Christ’s name (cf. 2:1–2, 6). The exact construction

¹ Judith M. Lieu, *I, II, & III John: A Commentary* in *The New Testament Library* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 85–7.

² Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 87.

διὰ τὸ ὄνομα in the New Testament is found 6 out of 7 times in a context where persecution is implied: “You will be hated because of my name” or something similar in Matt. 10:22; 24:9; Mark 13:13; Luke 21:17; John 15:21; Rev. 2:3. However, John’s usage here is more typical of the Greek Scriptures of the Old Testament, where the phrase is used in context of God’s actions toward his elect people for the sake of his holy reputation or for the honor of his name: 1 Sam. 12:22; 2 Chr. 6:32; Is. 60:9; Jer. 14:21; Ezek. 36:21–22; 39:25.

- 1 John 2:28 – The readers are called “little children” in the context of John’s command to abide in Christ so that they will have confidence and not shame at his second coming.
- 1 John 3:7 – John used “little children” to warn the readers to practice discernment regarding those who practice righteousness and those who practice unrighteousness.
- 1 John 3:18 – The “little children” are commanded to learn that love is not simply a matter of word and tongue, but a matter of work and truth.
- 1 John 4:4 – The “little children” have their birth in God, and for this reason, the one in them is greater than the evil one who is in the world.
- 1 John 5:21 – “Little children” must guard themselves from idols.
- Interestingly, Paul used this term once and in a very helpful way. He wrote, “My children—I am again undergoing birth pains until Christ is formed in you!” (Galatians 4:19 [NET](#))
- Not only have these little ones had their sins forgiven according to the holy reputation of the name of Jesus, but they also had come to know the Father. This connects with what John will say later in verse 23: “Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:23 [ESVi](#)).
- John assured the “fathers” with confidence in their knowledge of God.
 - They represented those men who brought the abiding stability of the oldest, highest, and truest Christology (vv. 13a, 14b).
 - “Fathers” as a plural noun in John’s writings and in the rest of the New Testament mostly refers backwards into the past as a term to designate ancestors or forefathers, like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is only used as an address to present, living individuals a few times. Here in 1 John, and twice in Acts 7:2 (Stephen’s address) and 22:1 (Paul’s address). On both occasions, a speaker addressed a (mostly) Jewish crowd as “Brothers and Fathers.”
 - While all of those addressed in Acts were “brothers” of Jewish descent, only some of them were considered “fathers.” It seems that we have the same kind of idea here. All were children, but only some were fathers. The “fathers” were important in the present situation that the church faced. Those who

had seceded from the Christian community claimed special knowledge about creation, living, and particularly about the teachings about Christ. However, the “fathers” who remained with John and in the believing community “had known him who is from the beginning.” These “fathers” offered important stability to a church facing the discouragement of such a serious division.

- John assured the “young men” with confidence in their strength and victory over the evil one through the word (vv. 13c, 14c).
 - The strength of the young men to conquer the evil one came from the abiding word of God in them.
 - The young men have conquered the evil one.
 - The young men are strong.
 - The word of God abides in the young men.
 - The young men have conquered the evil one.
 - This is the way of Jesus in his temptation in the Gospels—he employed the word of God to defeat the evil one.
 - Jesus also encouraged the Twelve, when he said, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33 [ESVi](#)). We have a victorious fellowship with Christ. The “world” in John 16:33 and 1 John 4:4 and 5:4 is the word *κοσμος*. In these cases, the cosmos represents the world system that positions itself in open rebellion, hostility, and at odds with God. The evil one is behind this systematic hostility toward God and his program. However, the “young men” overcome the evil one and the world by the strength caused by the abiding word, by the Spirit of truth, and by the one in them who is greater than he who is in the world.
 - John recorded Jesus’ words in Revelation 2–3 to those who overcome:
 - They will receive the tree of life in the paradise of God.
 - They will not be hurt by the second death.
 - They will receive the personalized, white stone of entry into the Messianic Supper, where they eat of the hidden manna.
 - They will receive authority over the nations.
 - They will be clothed in white, remain in the book of life forever, and have their name confessed before the Father and his angels by Jesus Christ.
 - The overcomers will be eternally made a pillar in God’s heavenly, holiest place and on this one will be written God’s own name, the name of God’s Son, and the name of God’s city, the New Jerusalem, which will come down out of heaven.
 - They will be granted to sit on Christ’s throne with him, as he was granted to sit on his Father’s throne, because he overcame.

Transition: Lieu wrote, “The previous verses have rhetorically set the readers on a firm platform; they have achieved a certainty of faith and show no signs of instability. For the author, however, this offers no grounds for complacency. It has served to present a worldview where there is no room for negotiation between the sphere that belongs to God and to possession of God’s word, and the sphere that belongs to the evil one. The exhortation that follows presupposes the same uncompromising division.”³

- God equips true fellowship with eschatological readiness (2:15–19).
 - The “world” is the disappearing cosmic system that has positioned itself in open hostility with God (vv. 15–17).
 - Lieu on “world”: “Here, for the first time, the negative side of that division is labeled ‘world.’ On three occasions 1 John uses ‘world’ (*kosmos*) for the whole totality that is the setting for and the object of the salvation and forgiveness brought by Jesus (2:2; 4:9, 14), but these phrases sound formulaic, and do not represent the main thrust of his thought. More frequently in 1 John ‘world’ denotes a reality that is fundamentally negative: believers necessarily engage with the world, but it is intrinsically hostile to them and to the ways of God: they are to expect to experience its hatred (3:13). Insofar as the world is capable of response (4:5), it is personalized if not embodied in actual men and women; but it is more than the sum total of people, or even of those people who reject the message. In its totality it represents that sphere which is under the sway of the evil one (5:19), and it has its own inherent character and power, which comes close to setting it in antithesis to God (4:4–5).”⁴
 - Because of its position of hostility and its soon disappearance, John commanded the believers not to love it nor the things in it.
 - He again draws upon his use of dichotomy for discipleship: love for the system in open rebellion toward God and love for God cannot coexist in the believing community.
 - John explained the things in the world. Marianne Thompson wrote on this section, “[T]he conception of worldliness in this epistle goes far deeper than the idea of outlawing some behaviors that non-Christians tolerate. We are called to an active devotion to God that shapes all that we are and do. Barclay captures the essence of the passage when he entitles it ‘Rivals of the Human Heart’ (1976: 55). The world is not simply a passive entity, but a rival for the allegiance of every person.”⁵
 - The desire of the flesh
 - The word for “desires” can be nuanced negatively or positively; the context determines whether we are to understand evil or good

³ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 91.

⁴ Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 92.

⁵ Marianne Meye Thompson, *1–3 John* in The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 67.

desires. It seems that John has already framed this for us by listing that these are things in the world system that is in hostile rebellion against God. Compare James 1:14–15.

- Joseph Fantin wrote in an article for Dallas Theological Seminary, that the term “flesh’ (σάρξ) generally carries with it a negative connotation.”⁶ John’s writings, like many of Paul’s usages, also highlight the negative connotation in σάρξ:
 - “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13 ESVi).
 - “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6 [ESVi](#)).
 - “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63 [ESVi](#)).
 - Lastly, here in 1 John 2:16.
 - One lexicon describes σάρξ, “[A]s instrument of various actions or expressions . . . In Paul’s thought especially, all parts of the body constitute a totality known as σάρξ or *flesh*, which is dominated by sin to such a degree that wherever flesh is, all forms of sin are likewise present, and no good thing can live in the σάρξ (Rom 7:18).”⁷
- However, Fantin suggests that it is a bit shocking that John in his Gospel at 1:14 and in his epistles at 1 John 4:2 and 2 John 7 emphasized Jesus Christ’s coming in the σάρξ.
 - How can something so negative as σάρξ, which is typically understood as completely dominated by sin, be taken up by the Son of God? This confusion about the Messiah and σάρξ may have contributed to the secession of those who could believe that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. At the end of the first century, Gnosticism was not yet a system, but most believe that certain of its ideas were present, such as the division between the material/physical as evil and the immaterial/spirit as good. Eventually, this principle became applied to Jesus, creating a Docetic Christology, resulting in false teachings like adoptionism. This special gnosis that

⁶ Joseph Fantin, “A Good Word (σάρξ),” in the Voice (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 2025), <https://voice.dts.edu/digitalarticle/a-good-word-flesh/>, accessed on June 14, 2025.

⁷ Fredrick William Danker, et.al. eds., *A Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc., Version 2.8.

some claimed to have caused them to depart the church and caused John to emphasize the “in-fleshed coming” of Jesus Christ through his eyewitness experience. That the Word became flesh has always been what the apostles taught.

- The answer to the apparent conundrum is quite simple. Σάρξ doesn’t always bear a negative connotation. At times, it simply refers to the human, physical body with no reference to sin. John saw no problem in the capacity of the word to be used to convey both the human, physical body of Jesus (cf. Luke 24:39, where Jesus still has σάρξ after the resurrection!) and elsewhere for to describe the embodied experience of humans under the dominion of sin.
 - However, here, I John 2:16, “flesh” does carry a negative connotation referring to the human embodied experience, where “flesh” is in league with the “world.” In this capacity, the flesh has desires. We may look to Paul’s “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5, or his teachings in Romans 8, or to those things we are to put off in Ephesians 4; and in John, where the “flesh” is the opposite of the Spirit. In all three places, the “flesh” consistently stands for the disposition in humanity to stand in opposition to the Holy Spirit.
 - Many see an allusion to the serpent’s deception of Eve here, “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6 [NRSV](#); see also Eph. 2:3).
- The desire of the eyes
 - The concept of an evil eye throughout the biblical narrative functions as a metonymy, where the thing meant and the thing stated are switched. So, while the eyes are mentioned, readers know that envy and covetousness is implied. See for example, Mark 7:22. Also, the fleshly desires function through the eye(s) according to Peter, when he wrote about false teachers, “They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin” (2 Peter 2:14 [ESVi](#)).
 - Notice that it is through one’s eyes that evil desires go out.
- The pride of life
 - The NET Bible translates here, “the arrogance produced by material possessions.” The notes explain, “In this case, the material security of one’s life and possessions produces a boastful overconfidence. This understanding better fits the context here: The focus is on people

who operate purely on a human level and have no spiritual dimension to their existence. This is the person who loves the world, whose affections are all centered on the world, who has no love for God or spiritual things ('the love of the Father is not in him,' 2:15)."⁸ They go on, "The person who thinks he has enough wealth and property to protect himself and insure his security has no need for God (or anything outside himself)."⁹

- The hour (vv. 18–19)
 - The chronology of the "last hour" began at the crucifixion and continues until the imminent return of Christ.
 - The anticipated event of the last hour likely refers to Christ's imminent return.
 - Commentators paint a landscape associated with this last hour, which includes false teaching, worldly behavior, divisions in churches, among friends, and families. These things are consistent with the spirit of the antichrist.
 - Compare 2 John 4–11. The antichrist is simply a counterfeit Christ. Scripture offers us a twofold way of understanding the antichrist. First, that there are little antichrists led by the spirit of the antichrist, a counterfeit of God's work through the Holy Spirit who leads "little christs" or Christians. Second, the Scriptures anticipate a literal figure, who is the antichrist and whose deceit and hostility appears to be future. In this one, evil will be concentrated on a global scale on which the world has not seen. Compare 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12.
 - Gary Burge wrote, of J. H. Newman, "a nineteenth century pastor," who is recorded as saying, "[History] runs not towards the end, but along it, and on the brink of it; and is at all times near that great event, which, did it run towards it, it would at once run into. Christ then is ever at our doors." Burge goes on, "
 - It is the character of this last hour and the nature of the antichrist that stresses the need for what John writes next. In the midst of this last hour, God has provided and protected his people with his anointing.
 -
- God **protects** true fellowship by his anointing (2:20–27).
 - Summary of Commentators on *χρῖσμα*: Commentators are divided between the Spirit as the referent or the word/teaching about the gospel as the referent. They also discuss whether a literal anointing or a spiritual anointing is understood. Smalley helpfully asks why it must be either the Spirit or the word. I agree. In 1 John, the Spirit is the Spirit of truth, and the primary way of discerning him is by the confession that Jesus is the Christ who came in the flesh. John is the only NT writer to use the term, and it is found only in 2:20 and 2:27, where both the Spirit and teaching could be understood as the key source

⁸W. Hall Harris, eds., *The NET Bible Notes*, second edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019), paragraph 87731.

⁹Harris, eds., *The NET Bible Notes*, paragraph 87732.

of their knowledge. This double meaning of anointing for Spirit and teaching is a helpful corrective to Appalachian thinking about this idea.

Theological Tension: John's ecclesiology has a boundary.

- Separation between light and darkness.
- Separation between the church and the world (2:12–19).
- Separation between anointed Christology and anti-christologies (2:20–27).

Theological Truth: Fellowship that disregards truth for unity cannot flourish.

- Carefully consider Jesus' words in John 17, **"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them"** (John 17:20–26 ESV).
- Jesus' teaching and prayer for unity among the believers are anchored in the truth of the Father and the Son. Without a proper view of God as he has revealed himself (and in particular a biblical Christology), the body of believers cannot enjoy unity.

Theological Purpose: To encourage a flourishing fellowship unified in the truth.

Make It Personal: Harbor (make port) your life in Christ's light.

- Load your life with the maturity that only comes from time spent in the believing community.
- Unload worldliness from your life.
- Load true knowledge that originates from the Spirit and his Scriptures.

Closing Image: Return to Cargo Ships.