



LESSON 5

JOHN

THE APOSTLE OF LOVE

*Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following,
who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and . . .
seeing him, said to Jesus, "But Lord, what about this man?"*

JOHN 21:20-21

The disciple John is familiar to us not only as the disciple "whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23) but also because of what the Bible reveals about him through his own writings. As the human author of a sizable portion of the New Testament—a Gospel, three epistles, and the book of Revelation—we have a real sense of who he was as both a person and a disciple of Christ. Yet, surprisingly, he wasn't one of the dominant ones in Jesus' inner circle . . . at least not while his older brother James and the outspoken Peter were around. John eventually did become a central figure in the early church, and he was loved by Christians as a spiritual father.

Today, when we think of John, we forget that he was one of the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). We instead think of him as the wizened elder statesman of the faith who constantly wrote on the ideals of loving Christ and loving one

another. We forget that, time and again, he was right there acting in concert with his brother James—zealous to call down fire from heaven against the Samaritans and elbowing for position in Jesus' future kingdom. His zeal and ambition mirrored that of his elder brother.

So, how did John become known as “the apostle of love”? Part of the answer comes from the fact that John wrote so frequently on the topic of love in the New Testament—emphasizing the Christian's love for Christ, Jesus' love for His church, and the love for one another that is supposed to be the hallmark of true believers. The greater reason, however, is far more personal. John *learned* love from the One who loved him the most. Once that love had sunk in, this once-tempestuous man was never the same.

Just as Peter was the opposite of a steady “Rock” when he first met Jesus, so the younger Son of Thunder appears to have been anything but a loving apostle in the beginning. Truth always remained his passion, and John often spoke in black-and-white terms—a teaching style he no doubt learned from Jesus. Yet it is also clear that John learned the quality of *love* from Jesus and came to understand the value of “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). The Lord matured him and, over time, he became the beloved leader of the first-century church.

Three years with Jesus began the process of transforming John from a self-centered fanatic into a mature man of balance. Three years with Jesus moved him toward becoming an apostle of love. Jesus gave him equilibrium at the very points where he was most imbalanced. This why today, John stands as one of the Bible's shining examples of what lifelong spiritual growth should look like in the life of every true follower of Christ.

THE DISCIPLE WHOM JESUS LOVED

While the synoptic Gospels identify John by name approximately twenty times (including parallels), he is not so directly mentioned in the Gospel of John. Instead, the author identifies himself simply as the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). John's deliberate avoidance of mentioning his own personal name reflects his humility and celebrates his relation to his Lord Jesus.¹

STARTING OUT

Think of a leader you have known for years from work, within your family, in the church, or in your community. As you've watched that person age, how would you characterize his or her "trajectory"? Is this individual aging well like John or aging poorly? Explain your answer.

EXPLORING THE STORY

John was as rugged as any of the other fisherman-disciples. He was also as self-centered, hot-headed, and zealous as any of his peers. In fact, in his younger years, it would be fair to say he was prone to extremes in his thinking and his reactions. Jesus had to temper John's thunderous personality by teaching him the balance between *truth and love*, *ambition and humility*, and *suffering and glory*. In this section, we will explore how John learned these lessons.

Balance Between Truth and Love

John grew to become a beloved spiritual father and tenderhearted representative of the gospel, but Jesus never tried to displace the apostle's fierce passion for truth. Rather, the Lord taught John to hold truth and love in balance. Even early on, John had a heart that seemed calibrated for truth. We see this in how quickly he followed Jesus. All he needed was confirmation that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and he was all in (see John 1:35-37).

John's love for truth was also evident in the way he wrote. While John communicated to his audience in a warm, pastoral tone, his biblical messages aren't the first place we can turn for an encouraging word! True to his temperament,

he thought and wrote in absolutes—to the extent that an undiscerning reader might think he was still an extremist. John wrote that people are either walking in the light or dwelling in darkness. They either receive Christ or reject Him. They either love or hate . . . no in-between. John made sure in his writings that nothing about God's truth was fuzzy to believers. Of all the New Testament authors, he is the most cut-and-dried, drawing clear and convicting lines.

At the same time, John lovingly addressed his epistles to "my little children" (1 John 2:1); "the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth" (2 John 1); and "the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth" (3 John 1). He urged his readers to "love one another" (2 John 5) and "walk according to [God's] commandments," for "this is love" (verse 6). He reminded them, "This is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another" (1 John 3:11), adding, "Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (verse 18).

In John's epistles, written from the perspective of a disciple who has matured in the faith, we find a *balance* between truth and love. However, this was not always the case in John's younger years. A prime example is found in a story told in Mark's Gospel. John, after taking part in a debate about who among the disciples would be the greatest (see 9:33–34), said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us" (verse 38).

This same episode is also recorded in Luke's Gospel, just before the account of James and John asking to call down fire to annihilate the Samaritan town. In both cases, John was displaying an appalling intolerance, elitism, and lack of genuine love for people. In the incident with the Samaritans, James and John showed a lack of love for unbelievers. Here, John was guilty of a similar kind of unloving spirit toward a fellow believer. In John's view, if someone did not "follow with us" (Luke 9:49), that person was against them. But in Jesus' view, "No one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side" (Mark 9:39–40).

It is interesting that John chose to confess this to Jesus at all. Perhaps the reason is because he felt convicted. John had just watched Jesus take a little child, set him in the midst of the disciples, and say, "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me" (Mark 9:37). Perhaps John was realizing that his thinking and approach toward others left much to be desired.



A TRANSFORMATION

The fact that John made this confession was indicative of the transformation that was taking place in him. His conscience was bothering him. He was being tenderized. He had always been zealous and passionate for the truth, but now the Lord was teaching him to love. This is a major turning point in his life and thinking. He was beginning to understand the necessary equilibrium between love and truth.²



God's kingdom needs people who have courage, ambition, drive, passion, boldness, and a zeal for the truth. Yet balance is necessary. Anyone who longs to serve effectively for God must cultivate truth and love in equal proportions—loving as Jesus taught us to love.

- Read 1 John 3:4–9. John, of course, knew that believers do fall into sin at times (see John 1:8). So what is he saying here about sin and what it represents in a believer's life? What is the black-and-white truth about sin that John is illuminating for followers of Christ?

- Read 1 John 3:16–17. John, of course, knew that believers fail to love others at times. So what is he saying here about love and how it should be evident in a believer's life? What is the black-and-white truth about love that John is illuminating for followers of Christ?

- Read Luke 9:46–48. How might this lesson have prompted John to rethink whether he should have forbade the man from casting out demons in Jesus' name? What was Jesus teaching the disciples about loving one another?

- What do you learn about the importance of truth and love based on the stories you have read involving John? How well do you strike this balance in your interactions with people?

Balance Between Ambition and Humility

Most young people today have dreams and ambitions—and that is a good thing. John certainly did . . . and Jesus saw it as a good thing. In the Lord's eyes, the problem wasn't that John had dreams and goals but rather his *spirit* and *motives* behind those ambitions. In John's story, what we find early on in his life is that he was driven by selfishness, pride, and ego.

Ambition without humility is not only dangerous but also a sin. Humility is so important that Jesus reminded His disciples numerous times of its necessity in their zeal for ministry. One of those reminders was precipitated by the request from John and his brother to be seated next to Jesus in the coming kingdom. We looked at this story in the previous lesson as it was told in the Gospel of Matthew. Here, we will take a look at the story from Mark's Gospel.

In Mark's account, we find that James's and John's timing is ironic. They approached Jesus shortly after John had admonished the fellow believer (see Mark 9:38–41) and just a few verses after Jesus had said, "Many who are first will be last, and the last first" (10:31). Again, having ambition wasn't where James and

John went wrong. The brothers' error was in desiring the *position* more than they desired to be *worthy* of such a position. Coming as it did on the heels of so many admonitions from Jesus about humility, the brothers' request shows amazing audacity. It reveals how utterly devoid of true humility they were.

What follows in Mark's Gospel also reveals how devoid of humility *all* the disciples were, for "when the ten heard it, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John" (verse 41). The others were *displeased* because they also wanted positions of authority in Jesus' kingdom and were none too pleased when they saw John and James asserting themselves. The squabble prompted Jesus to remind them that the highest positions in His kingdom will be reserved for the humblest saints on earth (see verses 41–45).

John eventually did learn to balance his ambition with humility. In his Gospel, he never mentions his own name. Instead, he calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23; 20:2; 21:7, 20). This isn't prideful John trying to lord his closeness to Jesus over the other disciples. Rather, this is mature John glorifying Jesus for having loved someone like him.

Jesus' example of love *and* humility had a humbling effect on John. In fact, it is only John's Gospel that details Jesus' ministry of washing the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. That the sinless Son of God would do such a thing the night before His death made a lasting impression on John, for the disciple lived what he learned from his Lord to his dying day.

HUMILITY

The term *humility* is not found in the Latin or Greek vocabularies of the first century. The Greek word frequently used for *humility* in the New Testament—*tapeinoó*, literally meaning "lowliness" (see Ephesians 4:2)—was apparently coined by Christians (perhaps even by the apostle Paul) to describe a quality for which no other word was available. Humility, the most foundational Christian virtue (see James 4:6), is the quality of character commanded in the first beatitude (see Matthew 5:3) and describes the noble grace of Christ (see Philippians 2:7–8).³

- Read John 13:3–17. Jesus not only taught His disciples about humility but also personally modeled it for them. What instructions did Jesus give to them at the end of this passage?

- Read 1 John 3:1–3. Notice John’s words about his readers. What do these expressions indicate about the transformation of his character?

- Read 3 John 9–10. What was it about Diotrephes that drew John’s attention? Why do you think John was able to so clearly recognize this fault?

- Think about some of the ambitions you have and the skills you possess to achieve them. How do you balance these ambitions in your life with humility?

Balance Between Suffering and Glory

In John's younger years, he had a thirst for glory. He and his brother had gone so far as to assure Jesus they could drink His cup of suffering (see Mark 10:39). But when the moment of truth came the night before His crucifixion—surrounded by a crowd with swords and clubs and with Jesus' betrayer in their midst—what did John and the other disciples do? They abandoned their Savior, Teacher, and Lord in the hope of avoiding suffering (see 14:43–50).

John had seen Jesus' glory firsthand on the Mount of Transfiguration. He treasured Jesus' promise that he would share in that glory (see Matthew 19:28–29). John's desire was similar to that of the psalmist who wrote, "As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness" (Psalm 17:15). A desire to participate in Jesus' glory is therefore fitting for every child of God. But Jesus was clear that those who desire to participate in His heavenly glory must also be willing to partake of earthly sufferings.

Paul wrote, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together" (Romans 8:16–17). Suffering is the price of glory. The "chief seats" in God's kingdom are not the "cheap seats." There is a cost to pay.

John and James had been naïve in proclaiming they could drink of the cup Jesus would drink and be baptized with the baptism of suffering He would endure (see Mark 10:38–39). James was the first to realize what this actually meant when he was imprisoned by Herod and then sent to a martyr's death. But the rest of the disciples would follow. Tradition states that they all were martyred one by one, in the prime of life, in horrific ways. All of them, that is, except for John. He alone of the twelve disciples lived to an old age.

Yet this does not mean that John escaped suffering. Certainly, he bore the loss of his brother in a deeply personal way. He would have witnessed the other disciples being put to death one by one—suffering each loss of his friends and companions with renewed grief and pain. In some ways, that might have been the most painful suffering of all. Furthermore, early sources state that John became the pastor of the church that Paul had founded in Ephesus and then was exiled to a prison community on Patmos, located in the Aegean Sea.

This took place during a persecution of the church under the Emperor Domitian. There, on Patmos, John lived in a dank cave, slept on a rock slab, and endured

cruel treatment with no access to his loved ones. It was just one more lesson in John's life about the balance between suffering and glory. Even so, the book that John penned on that remote island contains no hint of bitterness. Instead, he described himself to his fellow believers as "both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9).

How many of us would say the same? Only those who, like John, have the proper perspective of what is required in the here and now to receive future glory with Christ. As Peter wrote, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7). This is the balance between suffering and glory.

- Read Matthew 16:24-28. How does Jesus describe the cost of being His follower? What does He say is the reward for being faithful to Him?

- Read John 18:12-15. It is likely the reference to "another disciple" is John. What firsthand experience of suffering did John learn from Jesus in this scene? How do you think this event enabled John to understand the true cost of being a disciple of Christ?

- Read Philippians 3:8-11. Why was Paul willing to suffer “the loss of all things” in this world for the sake of Christ? What type of “fellowship” did Paul want to know?

- How do you respond to this idea that earthly suffering is the price of eternal glory? How could keeping your focus on the rewards that you will receive from Jesus in the life to come help you to deal with the pain and suffering that come in this present life?

CONSIDERING YOUR STORY

Read John 19:25-27. Few who knew John in his early years would have thought of him as “the apostle of love.” Yet this scene from the cross shows that John got the message. He learned Jesus’ lessons so well that the Lord assigned him the care of His own mother.

- Jesus told Peter, “Feed My sheep” (John 21:17). He told John, “Take care of My mother.” What would be your response if Jesus were to ask such a thing of you today?

- What are some practical ways that God's love has transformed your opinion of others? How has His love transformed your actions toward others?

- John learned the importance of balance. Think about a task that you believe God has given you to do. What are the top three areas in which you need balance to accomplish that task?

Balance in the first area . . .

Balance in the second area . . .

Balance in the third area . . .

APPLYING TO YOUR LIFE

Jesus' love and the work of the Holy Spirit moved John from the far edges of zeal to spiritual maturity, steadiness, and love. What are some of the main takeaways that you have gained from John's example? What would you like God to help you understand about yourself?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, I can be quick to avoid pain, judge others, and feed my pride. I don't want those impulses to become ways of life. I want my legacy to be that of a loving servant-leader who stays in step with You. Some days I can see progress—I see You maturing me. Other days I get caught up in my own plans and schemes. Today, I have this one request: Cultivate Your desires in my life so that I am centered in Your will. In Your glorious name. Amen.

Notes

1. John MacArthur, author and general editor, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), introduction to the Gospel of John.
2. John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 105.
3. MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, note on Ephesians 4:2.