



This morning we're continuing our study of the letters of John. Last week we began by looking at the first four verses of 1 John and tried to understand some of the background behind these letters. You'll recall that 1, 2, 3 John were written by the Apostle John. He also wrote the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation. In his gospel, John never identified himself by name but called himself, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Isn't that great? We should all think of ourselves that way! He was also the last surviving apostle, living well into his 90's. He spent most of his final years in the city of Ephesus, providing leadership for many of the congregations in the surrounding area of Asia Minor. You can just imagine the kind of reverence there was for John as the last one alive who had been part of the twelve.

There's a story told by one of the early Church Fathers that at the end of his life John became so weak he could no longer preach. He had to be carried into the church and when they did that he'd always say the same thing: "Little children," he'd say, "love one another." When someone asked him why he kept saying the same thing, he responded, "Because it's the Lord's command, and if this is all you do, it's enough."

I think that's what troubled John as he wrote these letters. You see, as you read these letters it's quite evident not everyone was getting along. There was a particular group in these churches who were causing unrest and splintering off into their own sect. They saw themselves as especially enlightened and were teaching things that caused the many in John's churches to question their own authenticity as believers. John wrote these letters to help them deal with this problem and ultimately to assure and stabilize them in their faith.

Much of the confusion was around the whole idea of sin. What part does sin play in the life of a follower of Jesus? Is it no longer an issue? Does something happen to us that causes sin to not even be a problem? Does it even matter? Now that I'm forgiven and Jesus lives in my heart and I'm a new creation, does it even matter if I sin? And could it even be that some of the things we call sin aren't sin at all?

These questions are relevant for us today. I recently read a prayer that's a satire on our shallow view of sin. It's a modern overhaul of a traditional prayer of confession from the Book of Common Prayer. The original prayer goes like this, "Most merciful God, we confess that we've sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we've done, and by what we've left undone.

We've not loved you with our whole heart; we've not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We're truly sorry and we humbly repent, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen."

That's a great prayer, but here's the modern overhaul: "Benevolent and easy-going Parent: We've occasionally had some minor errors of judgment, but they're not really our fault. Due to forces beyond our control, we've sometimes failed to act according to our own best interests. Under the circumstances, we did the best we could. We're glad to say we're doing okay, perhaps even slightly above average. Be your own sweet Self with those who know they're not perfect. Grant us to continue to live a harmless and happy life and keep our self-respect. We ask all these things according to the unlimited tolerances which we have a right to expect from you. Amen."

That's may just a bit extreme, but you get the idea. This is the kind of thing John is addressing. So in 1:5–2:2, John corrects some of the false assumptions about sin being propagated by these false teachers we call Gnostics. In doing so, he gives us a clear picture of what authentic Christianity looks like, especially in regard to sin.

### **Affirmation About the Character of God**

John starts out and says the message I'm giving to you here comes straight from Jesus. "*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you.*" Nothing more, nothing less. I'm not making this up. I'm not even extrapolating on something Jesus hinted at. This message came straight from him; we heard it with our own ears.

At this point I'd expect John to say something about the problems and issues they were facing in their churches, but he doesn't do that. Instead, he starts with God. He starts with theology. Here's the message: "*God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.*" The most important thing about you is how you think about God. Most of our problems and issues, even when it comes down to the nitty gritty details of our lives like the choices we make every day, come down to our view of God.

What does John mean when he says God is light? Remember, God created light. God said on the first day of creation, "*Let there be light.*" With that he separated light from darkness. From that time on, light and darkness have had symbolic meaning. Light

symbolizes two things about God. First, light illuminates so it symbolizes truth while darkness symbolizes error and ignorance. God is the One who reveals truth to us through his word, so the psalmist can say, *“Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path”* (Ps. 119:105). Second, light symbolizes holiness, righteousness, purity and goodness while darkness symbolizes sin, corruption and rebellion. So in Ephesians Paul could say, *“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord”* (Eph. 5:8-10).

John says that’s the first thing you need to know: God is light. He’s holy, righteous and good. There’s no darkness at all in him. You see evil in this world. You see darkness and ignorance. None of those things come from God. There’s no darkness in him! You see these things in your own life? It’s not from God.

That’s the fundamental affirmation of this entire letter. Everything else John says flows from this. Get this wrong and the whole superstructure crumbles. It’s from this affirmation about God that John goes on and deals with the false teaching in his churches. There were three claims the Gnostics were making and John exposes those and brings God’s light to bear on them so that the true believers will stand strong.

### **Claim #1: We Can Have Fellowship with God and Walk in the Darkness**

The first claim is found in verse 6, *“If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness we lie and do not live out the truth.”* There a couple of words here that are significant. He talks about fellowship with God. We hear that word “fellowship” and we immediately think of a potluck dinner with green jello and casual conversation about yesterday’s football game. But fellowship meant much more than that. It was a word used to describe close partnerships where you had a common purpose and goal. It’s like being on the same team. John says you can’t claim to have that kind of partnership with God and yet walk in darkness. That word “walk” is also important. It points to our ethical behavior; how we live our lives; the choices we make; the attitudes we nurture.

Put this all together and John is saying, “Listen, you can’t claim to belong to God and walk in habitual sin.” How do we really know someone belongs to God? Your beliefs change, but something else changes as well: how you behave. You can’t separate those two things. When you come to know God, things change. You change. It doesn’t happen overnight. You don’t change all at once. It’s a “walk” and that word implies progress. But when you place your faith in Jesus Christ and you begin a relationship with the God of the universe you get a new heart. Let me ask you—since you met Jesus, how have you changed?

As most of you know, I met Christ in 1974 when I was 17. I was a typical adolescent young man of that day. I smoked pot. I was involved in sexual immorality. I was self consumed. For 17 years I never had a second thought about any of those things. I was guilt free! But when Christ entered my life, I knew those things had to change. The light of God’s truth and holiness was now shining on me, exposing my sin. I knew immediately I was being changed. It’s not that I never sinned again, but I began a process of shedding those things from my life.

Some of you here really don’t know what I’m talking about. You say you know God but you’re living in habitual sin and you don’t even care. John says that’s a lie. By the way, that’s what the Gnostics were saying. They believed the body was just an envelope for the spirit. The body doesn’t matter, only the spirit matters. What you do with your body is meaningless. You can live a totally immoral life—and many of them did—and still claim to know God in your spirit.

But John doesn’t stop there. He goes on and he gives the positive corollary to that. He says, *“But if we walk in the light as he is in the light...”* We can walk in the light. When we do that two things happen. First, *“we have fellowship with one another.”* Isn’t it interesting that sin pushes us apart? The Gnostics who claimed to be in fellowship with God were breaking fellowship. When we walk in the light we’ll deal with things in our lives that push us apart, like selfishness, gossip, resentment and jealousy.

The second thing that will happen when we walk in the light is *“the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin.”* The blood of Jesus points to the death of Jesus on the cross. We’ll talk about that more later. But we might ask, “If I’m walking in the light, what sin do I need to be purified from?” I believe here John is talking not about specific acts of sin (he’ll get to that later) but sin collectively. For example, as far as I know I’m not sinning right now, but God sees what I can’t see and I’m sure if he were to scrutinize every nook and cranny of my being, he’d find plenty of sin. It’s in that sense he says here his blood purifies us from all sin. It’s interesting that he uses a verb tense that indicates this act of purifying is ongoing and continuous. It’s like a constant covering. John says, if we walk in the light, that’s what he does.

### **Claim #2: We are Without Sin**

This brings us naturally to the second false claim in verse 8, *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”* Notice he says “sin” rather than “sins.” Sin is in the singular and the claim here is that they’re basically incapable of sin because there’s no sin inherent in their nature. These Gnostics believed they were so enlightened that the sinful nature was eradicated.

Maybe it’s hard for us to imagine someone claiming this today, but if you really think about it, it’s not so far fetched. We live in a society where some psychologists and sociologists explain

sin away. "Well, it's not really sin, it's a genetic issue or it's the environment in which he was raised." I hear people rationalizing sin away all the time. There's even a brand of Christianity today where the idea is if you have some kind of spiritual experience like full surrender or a second blessing you can reach a place where you're no longer capable of sin. This is called "Christian Perfectionism."

I love what R.C. Sproul says about this: "Inevitably the error of perfectionism breeds one, or usually two, deadly delusions. To convince ourselves that we've achieved sinlessness, we must either suffer from a radical overestimation of our moral performance or we must seriously underestimate the requirements of God's law." John says it a little differently. He says if you claim that you're just deceiving yourself. With the first false claim he said you lie to others, but here he says you lie to yourself and the truth isn't in you.

Again, John doesn't stop there but offers the positive corollary. He says, "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify is from all unrighteousness.*" The authentic Christian life isn't a life where you never sin, rather it's a life where when you do sin you don't hide it or deny it but you confess it. As you walk in the light, one of the things that light does is it reveals more of your sin on a deeper and deeper level. And so, confession is an ongoing discipline of the Christian life. Before I was a Christian I'd go to confession about once every six months. What I recall about that is not being able to remember any sins to confess. No kidding. I wallowed in sin, but I was blind to it. I was in darkness. It was only when God's light began to shine on me that I saw and confessed my sin.

Notice several things about this: Notice the word "confess." That means to say the same thing or to agree with. When you confess your sins you're agreeing with God about what you've done. You're not rationalizing it, excusing it or denying it; you're saying the same thing God says about it. That's confession. It wasn't a fling; it was adultery. It wasn't a fib; it was a lie. It wasn't a slip of the tongue; it was gossip. It's like God is the umpire and he gets to call the balls and strikes. Confession is when you stop arguing with the umpire and say, "You're right. You made the right call. That was a strike and I'm out." And confession is more than just admitting sin, but implied in this is the idea of turning away from it as well. That's where the idea of repentance comes in. By the way, you can't repent of someone else's sins. Some of us are good at that. "Lord, please forgive my wife for losing her temper." No, you can let your wife confess her own sins; you just confess your sins.

Notice also who it is we confess to. It doesn't really tell us here but the clear implication is we confess primarily to the One we've offended. Sin is first an offense against God, so we confess first to him. But there are also times when it's right and appropriate to

confess our sins to one another. James tells us to confess our sins to each other (5:16). There are times when I've hurt or offended someone and I need to go to them and say, "I sinned against you. I was wrong and I'm sorry."

Notice also what it is we confess. He doesn't say to confess your "sin" but your "sins." He's talking about specific sins we commit as we go through life. These can be thoughts, words or actions. Don't come to God and say, "Lord, I confess that sometimes I'm selfish." Or, "God, I confess sometimes I say things I shouldn't say." Or, I hear this a lot, "God, I confess I haven't been perfect today." When God hears that sort of thing, do you know what he says? He says, "Could you please be a bit more specific? Details, please!" It's not like he doesn't know, but you need to say it and your willingness to say it shows a desire to deal with it. So tell him. "God, I confess I lied to Mary when I told her I had another commitment." "God, I confess I chose to turn on the computer and watch pornography." "God, I've harbored bitterness at my husband because I feel unappreciated."

What happens when we confess? John says, "*he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins...*" Forgiveness here means sin no longer comes between us in a relational sense. When we become a Christian through faith in Christ, we're justified, we're declared "not guilty" of all sin. But, as we go through life, we sin and that impacts our relationship with God. The only way for that relationship to be restored is ongoing confession and forgiveness. But there's more. Not only does he forgive us but he also "*purifies us from all unrighteousness.*" Do you know that feeling of being dirty? It's like the first thing you want to do is take a shower, but no shower can clean your heart. Only God can scrub your heart clean and that's what he does. And he does it because he's both faithful and just. He promised to forgive and he's faithful to keep his promise. He's also just. As we'll see in a moment, he doesn't just look the other way. He deals with our sin in a way that fulfills his justice.

### **Claim #3: We Have Not Sinned**

The third claim John refutes is very similar to the second. In verse 10 he says, "*If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.*" The only difference here is they're not saying they're incapable of sin in their nature but they no longer sin in practice. Charles Spurgeon was confronted by a man who made this very claim. Spurgeon invited him to dinner. During the meal, he picked up his glass of water and threw it in the guy's face. Understandably, the man was quite angry and flew off the handle. Then Spurgeon looked at him and said, "Ah, you see, the old man within you isn't dead. He'd simply fainted and could be revived with a glass of water!"

John says if we say we haven't sinned we make God out to be a liar. He's certainly covered all the bases. In the first claim we lie to others, in the second claim we lie to ourselves, and here we

make God out to be a liar because God has said in his word that we've all sinned.

That's where John turns next. The positive corollary to this claim is found in the first two verses of chapter 2. He says, *"My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin..."* That's important because that should be our desire. He didn't say all that stuff about forgiveness so we could just go out and sin. I've heard that kind of thinking. I've even tried to use it: "I can go out and sin because I know God will be there to forgive me when it's all over." John says, don't think that way. If you think that way something is wrong. Everything I'm saying here is to keep you from sinning. When you go out and play basketball, you try to make every shot, right? You may know you won't make every shot, but that's what you try to do. It's the same way in the Christian life. You don't set out to sin; you set out to not sin. At the same time, you know you will sin and when you do you know what to do.

John says, *"But, if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."* This is one of the great statements in all the Bible about the work of Christ for us. Everything John has said about being forgiven and purified is based on this. This says two things about his work when we sin. First, he's our advocate with the Father. An advocate is one called alongside us to speak in our defense. He's described as the Righteous One—the One who is righteous stands before the Father on behalf of those who aren't righteous. Our advocate doesn't plead that we're innocent or give excuses for our behavior, but he admits our guilt and presents another ground for our acquittal. The ground for our acquittal is the second thing he says about Christ's work. He's the atoning sacrifice for our sins. That means he paid the price for our sins and that totally satisfied the justice of God. That's why earlier he could say, *"...he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins..."* His justice demanded payment. What's great about this is he's not a God who reluctantly forgives us because he is forced

to or somehow Christ talks him into it. He's the One who sent his Son in the first place. *"For God so loved the world..."*

Let me try to summarize all this for you. It seems to be that John is saying the authentic Christian life is one in which three things are true: First, we walk in the light. Our lives have been changed and we don't walk in habitual sin that's not repented of. Second, we confess our sins. We will sin and when we do God will shine his light on us and we then can bring that sin to him in confession and repentance. Third, we look to and trust in the work of Christ as God's provision for our forgiveness and purification.

In a sense, the authentic Christian life is one in which we're inconsistently consistent. I've heard people talk about being consistently inconsistent, but I like the idea better of being inconsistently consistent. What do I mean by that? We're consistent in our commitment to walk in the light and not to sin, but we're also inconsistent in our success. We're consistent in our willingness to confess our sins, but we're also inconsistent in our ability to overcome sin. Finally, we're consistent in our looking to Christ to pay for our sin, but inconsistent in looking to him to eradicate it from our lives.

It's appropriate for us to end by having an opportunity to just confess our sins. In a moment we'll have some time for both personal confession but then also corporate confession as we pray that 500-year-old prayer from the Book of Common Prayer.

*"Most merciful God, we confess that we've sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We've not loved you with our whole heart; we've not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We're truly sorry and we humbly repent, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen."*

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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