

Read 1 John 1:1-2:11

John uses this phrase “my little children” often in his epistle.

It communicates two things very clearly:

- 1) It is a term of endearment:
he loves them like a father loves his children
- 2) But it also communicates a certain authority:
he expects them to obey him like children obey their father.

When I say to my children, “Children,”

they know *both* that I love them, and that I expect them to obey.

Why did John write this epistle to his spiritual children?

He gives us three reasons in the opening dozen verses:

- “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard,
so that you also may have fellowship with us (1:3)
- “We write this *to make our joy complete* (1:4)
- “I write this to you, *so that you will not sin* (2:1)

And he gives us one final reason at the end:

- “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God
so that you may know that that you have eternal life (5:21)

These reason all swirl around the general theme of assurance.

John is writing to encourage and exhort the church to abide in Christ.

We saw in chapter 1 John’s central affirmation that God is light.

Two ways – light and darkness

Walking in the darkness is incompatible with communion with God.

As Robert Yarbrough has said (p71),

“If God is light, and if he desires the worshipful fellowship (1:3-7) of humans,
then those humans must somehow be delivered from darkness –
that is, from sin,

whether conceived of as so-called sin nature or as particular wrongful acts.

To this end, their privilege is to embrace a saving knowledge of God, who is light.”

And in 1:9 we saw that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to do two things:

to forgive us our sin – guilt is removed through forgiveness –

and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness – our sinfulness itself is washed away.

It is not at all too much to say that 1 John 1:9 begins the epistle

with an affirmation of both our justification – the forgiveness of our sins –
and our sanctification – the cleansing from unrighteousness.

But as 1:8 and 1:10 have made clear,
if we say we do not *have* sin – if we say that sin is not a problem for us –
then we are liars –
and if we say that we have not *sinned* – if we deny our concrete sins –
then we make *him* to be a liar!

And so John continues in chapter 2, verse 1, by saying:

1. Don't Use This Teaching as an Excuse for Sin! (v1)

I My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.

Any message that comes across as saying that it is okay for Christians to sin
is utterly inconsistent with the gospel.

John insists that the Christian gospel of the forgiveness of sins through Christ's blood
results in people who turn away from sin.

Or as Yarbrough says,

“He writes to commend a higher road:
liberation from the compulsion to believe, behave, and love
in ways that fall short of God's glorious and transforming light.” (71)

But what is sin?

What is this thing that John so fervently wants you to avoid?

For John, sin includes three different things:

- 1) sin is unbelief – sin invariably results from a failure to believe God;
if you believe what God has said, then you do what he says!
- 2) But sin is also disobedience – it is a failure to do what God has said
- 3) And third, sin is also a catastrophic failure of love;
or to use the word we have already seen in chapter 1,
sin is a lack of communion/fellowship with God.

This means that you can believe the right things, and do the right things,
but if you lack love, then you may still be sinning!

Or your heart may be in the right place, and you believe the right things,
but your behavior is flatly unacceptable.

Or your heart may be in the right place, and you do good deeds,
but you do not believe what God has said.

In other words, sin is not just failure to observe a set of rules.

And so therefore, the Christian life is not simply a list of doctrines to believe,
and a list of rules to observe.

It includes both of those, but in both of those, it involves communion with God himself!

That's why John started with the incarnation in chapter 1.
This historical reality of the incarnation of the Son of God
is at the heart of our communion with God,
because in the incarnation of the Word,
the life of God took to itself the life of man.
God became all that we are by nature,
so that we might become all that he is by grace!

And therefore, John writes to us so that we may not sin.

Now, John knows that you are going to struggle with this,
and so he affirms:

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Jesus four times referred to the Holy Spirit as a paraclete (advocate)
in John 14-16.

But here it is Jesus.
John understood what Jesus meant when he said
that there would be no advantage to us unless he went to the Father.
Because it was only if the Son went to the Father
that he would send the Holy Spirit as the paraclete *here*.
But that would also mean that *Jesus* would be our paraclete (our advocate)
at the right hand of the Father.

And here Jesus is referred to as "Jesus Christ the righteous."
If you sin, you have a righteous advocate.
This does not merely mean that he is a just person.
It also means that he is the righteous one –
and this is fleshed out in verse 2:

2. Jesus Is the Propitiation for the Sins of the Whole World (v2)

2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world.

First, we need to ask: what does propitiation mean?
Propitiation has to do with the atoning sacrifice presented to God.
The word *'ilasmōs* has to do with the mercy seat,
the cover of the ark of the covenant,
the place where the blood of the sacrifice was offered before God.

God's justice must be satisfied –
and in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ *the righteous*,
God's justice *is* satisfied.

But why did Jesus have to *die* in order to cleanse us from sin?
Why couldn't God have just forgiven us?

It is a matter of justice.
Think about it this way:

We pray "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

Sin is a debt

And debts *must* be paid – either by the debtor or by the creditor –
if you forgive someone their debt, then you are absorbing the loss yourself

If someone breaks your window,
you either will make him pay to fix it – or you will yourself pay to fix it
(There is a third option: you could just leave it shattered –
God could have left this world shattered forever.
But if he didn't want to do that,
then either he must make *us* pay,
or he must make *himself* pay.)

And since the wages of sin is death,
therefore someone had to die.

Jesus is the propitiation for our sins – he is the one who satisfies God's justice –
and *not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world*.

Propitiation has to do with the *sufficiency* of redemption.

When Christ offered himself as the atoning sacrifice to the Father,
when his blood was sprinkled before the heavenly altar,
no one was *actually* forgiven at that moment.

Rather, it is *because* of that once-for-all act
that Jesus Christ has become the advocate with the Father.

And because Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world,
because he offered the fully sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world,
therefore anyone who comes to the Father pleading for mercy
will find it through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Some people try to make this mean less than it says:
they try to say that this does *not* mean that Christ is the propitiation
for the sins of the whole world.

But whatever this text means, it cannot mean the opposite of what it says!

Other people, however, try to make this mean more than it says!
They try to say that because Christ is the propitiation
for the sins of the whole world,

that therefore Christ died equally for every individual!

But that is also not what John says.

Think about the OT background to this.

When the high priest offered the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement,
atonement was made for the sins of the people –
a propitiation was offered for the sins of all Israel.
But that does not mean that all Israelites were therefore forgiven.

The sacrifice was a propitiation for the sins of all the people –
but in order to be forgiven, you must repent and confess your sins.

Many of the early Fathers pointed out that the “whole world” in this instance
meant “the whole church” (Hilary of Arles – ca. 440)

The venerable Bede said that Christ is the advocate and propitiation
“for the whole church which is scattered over the full compass of the world,
and it will be valid for everyone,
from the very first among the elect until the last one
who will be born at the end of time...

The Lord pleads for the sins of the whole world,
because the church which he has bought with his blood
exists in every corner of the globe.”

Louis Berkhof wisely put it this way:

Christ’s sacrifice is *sufficient* for all, but *efficient* for the elect.
As a propitiation, Christ’s sacrifice is sufficient for the sins of the whole world.
This does not mean that he offered himself for the sins of each individual.
Rather, it means that he offered himself as a sacrifice
sufficient to cover the sin of the whole world.

Christ has delivered the whole of humanity from sin and death.
That does not mean that he has delivered each individual from sin and death.

In order for an individual to say “Christ died for my sins,”
you must be united to Christ by faith!

Therefore, it is true to say that Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world.

It is also true to say as Jesus did in John,
“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,
just as the Father knows me and I know the Father;
and I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:14-15)

It is important to say that Christ died to save *humanity* – in general;
but it is also important to say that Christ died to save *his people* – in particular.

As many have pointed out,
if you say that Christ's sacrifice *accomplished* redemption for every individual,
then the result is either universal salvation,
or that Christ's sacrifice only made redemption *possible* for individuals.

If Christ's death truly paid the price for every sin of every individual,
then the debt is fully paid and every individual is saved.
The only way to explain the damnation of anyone
would be to go one of two ways:
either, divide the accomplishment of redemption from its application
(so some have said that Christ's death
accomplished redemption for everyone –
hypothetical universalism –
but then the Spirit is only given to some,
so the application of redemption is particular);
or, make the application of redemption dependent solely on the individual
(God has done his part in accomplishing our redemption –
now man has to do his part in accepting its application).

The problem with the first option
(hypothetical universalism – otherwise known as Amyrauldianism)
is that scripture does not support the idea
of severing the work of Christ from the work of the Holy Spirit.
Jesus says that the Spirit will be given to those who are "his."
The particularity of the work of Christ
is spoken of in the same terms as the work of the Holy Spirit.

The problem with the second option
(various forms of Arminianism)
is that it turns over the final say in salvation to man.

(and hopefully by now you have seen from Ezekiel how impossible that would be!)

So to say that Christ is the propitiation not only for our sins,
but for the sins of the whole world,
does not mean that he has died for every individual –
but rather that he has offered the full and sufficient sacrifice
for the sins of the whole world (in general).

And therefore, anyone who comes to him in faith will be saved.

But (you might ask) how do I know whether I have come to know him?

I'm glad you asked that question!

It's precisely the question that John turns to next!

3. If You Know Him, You Will Do What He Says (v3-6)

*3 And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.
4 Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, 5 but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: 6 whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*

How do you know that you have come to know him?

It's really simple: do you keep his commandments?

If you say you know him, but you don't act like it – then you are a liar!

John calls three types of people "liars."

Those who say they know him, but do not keep his commandments (here).

Those who say Jesus is not the Christ (2:22)

Those who say they love God, but hate their brother (4:20)

You can see in these three instances the intersection of three things:

Life in the Son grows out of right belief *and* obedient behavior.

If you deny that Jesus is the Christ – then you are a liar!

If you say you know God, but do not keep his commandments, then you are a liar!

Some might stop with right belief and obedient behavior.

But you can have a doctrinally orthodox moralism that is truly ugly –
because it lacks the heart: devotion and love for God himself.

Doctrine, ethics, and communion with God must all be there together.

As Yarbrough puts it, "John enjoins all three on Christ's followers,
just as he vests the gospel message with the capacity to produce them." (26)

but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.

If you keep God's word, the love of God is perfected in you.

As Gregory the Great put it,

"We can be said to be loving God

only to the extent that we are keeping his commandments."

The more we keep his word – the more the love of God is perfected in us.

Please – please! – pay careful attention to the preposition!

John is not saying that if you keep God's word, your love *for* God is perfected.

Rather he is saying that God's love is perfected in you.

John uses this phrase (the love of God) four times in 1 John –
and it has a range of meanings.
It is not simply God’s love for you –
but neither is it simply your love for God!

Rather, it is God’s love!

In 3:17 we are asked how the love of God “abides”
in the one who closes his heart against his brother.

In 4:9 we are told how the love of God “was made manifest among us”
in the incarnation of his Son.

And in 5:3 we hear that “this is the love of God,
that we keep his commandments”

God’s love was manifested in the incarnation of Christ.
God’s love abides in us when we open our heart to our brother in need.
God’s love is perfected in us as we “keep his word.”

Notice that John keeps using different ways of saying it.
He doesn’t want you to think that moralism will get you very far with God.
It’s not enough to adhere rigorously to a high moral standard.

You must *keep* the word of God!

And the word of God includes doctrinal teaching, moral precepts,
as well as the centrality of communion with God himself –
fellowship with the living God!

“I will be their God and they will be my people!”

And so John concludes:

*By this we may know that we are in him: 6 whoever says he abides in him ought to walk
in the same way in which he walked.*

This circles back to the core message:

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you,
that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness,
we lie and do not practice the truth.

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 cleanses us from all sin.” (1:5-7)

How do you know that you are in Christ?

Well, if you say you abide in Christ,
then you ought to walk in Christ’s way.

If his life – if the life of God himself – is in you,
then there ought to be some reflection of that in you!

But please note that John does not encourage an introspective piety!
He does not encourage you to start “thinking” about your life.
He tells you to get off your duff and start acting like you say you believe!

If you say that you abide in him – walk like him!

If you come to me and say, pastor, I’m really struggling with assurance –
then I will say to you,
believe the message – and *do* the truth –
because there is no other way for God’s love to be perfected in you!