

Living in the Light

1 John: Fellowship with God

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Bible Text: 1 John 1:5-10

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Our gracious God and heavenly Father, we thank you that the room here is full of praise and adoration to you and that it is our highest joy to worship you together and our delight to bring you the admiration of our hearts and the consecration of our lives. We thank you that you are our Father, that you know us through-and-through and that your word is able, first to find us and then to speak to us and then to transform us. We pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit this book that we read will live for us today in the grace and through the teaching of our Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ and so we come to you, our eyes are upon you, our hearts are full of affection for you, our wills bowed before you and we say to you, Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening. This we pray in Jesus our Savior's name. Amen.

Please be seated.

As you would see from the order of service, we began a new series of sermons last Lord's day. Actually, the series is entitled "Fellowship with God" and there is a little typographical error in the order of service but it's a very good typographical error because last Lord's day we were learning how the Apostle John is encouraging these young Christians in this way because they may have fellowship with us and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. So, we're enjoying fellowship with the Apostle John but our great desire is a fellowship with God.

Our Scripture reading today, 1 John 1:5-10 you'll find in the Pew Bible and there should be a copy of that either beside you or in front of you in the pew, page 1,021. For our children who have their Children's Bible, page 1,521.

Let us hear God's word,

"5 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. 6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 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. 8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the

truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

The Apostle John does something in these verses that is absolutely stunning. One of the reasons it's stunning is because it's so simple but it is actually something that radically transforms a person's entire life and makes them very different in a world in which they may be surrounded by those who are unbelievers and not Christians. It's actually so simple and so obvious that you realize I'm somewhat teasing you by saying these things just in case you never noticed what it is. But you did notice it, didn't you? Because it's so obvious and it's so simple, you couldn't possibly miss it and it is dramatically life changing. It may be one of the greatest differences between the Christian and the non-Christian. It's certainly a huge difference between the Christian and the non-Christian so what is it? You want to know now, don't you? It's this, I did say it was simple: he begins with God. He begins with God. It's obvious, isn't it? He says, “This is the message we have heard from him,” that is, the Lord Jesus, “and proclaim to you, God is light.” He begins with God.

Why is that so remarkable? It's so remarkable because our Western world no longer begins with God. Anyone who has taken a course in the intellectual history of the Western world will remember one of its most significant figures in the first half of the 17th century, Rene Descartes, whose great contribution or mal-contribution to the Western world was to get men beginning to think with themselves. Then, within another century, the influence of the extraordinary philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who for all practical purposes, shut off from men and women in his philosophy the possibility of the knowledge of God. When that happens, at the end of the day, all you are left with is ourselves. If you think that's a relatively incidental thing locked away in the departments of philosophy in our universities, if you look at the catalogues of the great universities of our time throughout the Western world and you were able to go back a number of years, you would notice a very obvious but dramatic change taking place. Most, if not all, of those universities used to have a faculty or Department of Divinity. In that department you studied God. That's what it was there for in almost every single one of the great universities of our time. That faculty or department has been renamed and now it's called the faculty or Department of Religion. What's the difference. In Divinity you're studying God, in Religion you're studying man. You're studying man as a religious being and so you see in a very influential way, in all the great intellectual centers of our time, that man-centeredness has become the supreme message of our time. Man, the measure of all things. Man, the proper study of man and, of course, if you don't begin with God, that is all you're going to be left with and so the great intellects, not least the great scientific intellects of our day, having abandoned a God-centered view of the universe are looking for something that will replace him, that will enable them still to speak of the cosmos in which we live as a universe.

So, it's hugely significant that when John speaks to these believers about what it means to live a gospel-centered life, he begins by speaking about the importance of a God-centered life and this isn't something that just belongs in the ivory towers of academia, this is

something that is relevant to you and to your next door neighbor and to the people alongside whom you work because if they are not believers, they don't begin with God either. The words you remember of the Psalmist, "God is not in their thoughts," is absolutely true. When they come to work, they are not thinking about God, their life isn't centered in God. When they think about their family, they are not thinking, "What does it mean for us as a family to have our family life centered in and rooted in the great God of the universe." When they think about their ambitions or their callings, their vocations in life, they're not thinking about living out of a center in God and the evidence of it is all around us.

I hope some of you, sometimes, come to the 8:30 service here because if you come to the 8:30 service here you will see something absolutely radically different from what you will characteristically see in the world. Almost every child who is brought down to the front of the church here for the children's sermon, is brought down by their, "Well, it's their mother, of course, isn't it?" No, almost without exception it's the father. Have you any idea how dramatically different that is from the world of absent fathers in which we live? It seems such a small and incidental thing but what does it tell you? It tells you there are these young fathers whose lives are centered in God and, therefore, it impacts how they lead their family and they're living among families who have no idea, who are going to the self-help or the child-help section of Barnes & Noble or whatever bookstore is still in town, or looking through the thousand books on Amazon that will tell you how to rear your children. Most of them disagreeing with each other and some of them reversing their views 20 years later because these young parents are all at sea. They don't know where to begin. They don't have a framework of reference. They are experimenting in the laboratory but God is not the first thing in their thoughts when it comes to their children, is it?

So, without us doing anything at all as Christian believers, the Apostle John is saying to these Christian believers in the late first century, "Being a believer is dramatically different and our God-centeredness is bound to ooze through the very pores of our being and touch everything we do." You'll notice something else that when he begins with God, here's a Trivial Pursuit question you could ask Christians, what does the Apostle John say about God in his first letter? My guess is the majority answer is going to be, perhaps the most famous text in the Bible even if people can't find where it is because it's near the end of the book and they usually don't read that far: God is love, 1 John 4:8. God is love.

But you notice, John doesn't begin there. Why does John not begin there? I mean, that would be a more seeker sensitive place to begin, wouldn't it? God is love. Precisely because John understands that we don't really understand what he means when he says, "God is love." When people say, "God is love," they very often mean God is like Mr. Rogers, don't they? I like you just the way you are. You're fine as far as I'm concerned so just go and do whatever you like because I'm a rather sleepy God sitting up here. Occasionally I open my eyes and I look down but, frankly, it doesn't matter too much to me what you're doing. I'm a God of love, after all. Are we wanting these fathers to be that kind of father to their children? It doesn't matter to me what you do. Just do anything.

Make a mess of your life as far as I'm concerned. It's fine with me. You see, that's not actually love. That's indifference.

And the reason John first of all says, "God is light," by which he means in this context, "purity and holiness," is because real love is always holy. The Bible speaks about God's love as being a jealous love and, my dear friends, if our love isn't jealous then it isn't love that we are expressing. You say that to any husband, any husband who loves his wife with real love, loves his wife with a holy and jealous love, test it by demeaning his wife in his presence. Test it by speaking of her in a way that besmirches her character. Why is that? Because he has given himself absolutely to this woman and he believes this woman in response to that love, has given herself wholly and absolutely to him. I know people sometimes say "I love you" but actually what they mean is "I want you" and that's the antithesis of love. But real love, real love always gives itself to its object absolutely and, therefore, desires that object absolutely to give love in return.

That's what John means when he says, "God is love." It means he is all-consuming in his passion, to give himself as he has done in Jesus Christ who is all-consuming in his passion to give himself to us and, therefore, in a gloriously loving way all-demanding. In a sense there is nothing more frightening in all the world than God's love. If you loved somebody else that you were willing to give your only child for them, if you had that kind of love, wouldn't that love be all-demanding of anyone who said, "Oh, I have received your love?"

This is what leads to what he goes on to say because you'll notice he has a lot of "ifs" and "buts" and "ands" in these few verses but he's really saying three simple things about knowing God and to have fellowship with the God who is light and in whom there is no darkness at all. The first is in verse 6 and you'll notice it consists in verse 6 of a negative and then in verse 7 a positive. The second is in verse 8 and it consists in a negative and then verse 9 in a positive. Then in verse 10, there is simply a negative. Let's look at these three implications he draws from what it means for us to have fellowship with God as the God of infinite light.

His first concern is that if we say we have fellowship with God, which is what we say, isn't it? That's what we're doing here, we're having fellowship with God in our lives. We're having fellowship with God. He says we have fellowship with God only in so far as we walk in the light. If we say, "I have fellowship with God," but walk in the darkness, that is to say, instead of bringing my sin and my need to the heavenly Father, exposed by the gaze of his word and his light. If I persist in walking in the darkness, then says the Apostle John and this is the apostle of love. Do you know, I think if you were to put it to the vote of a congregation, "Do you want the Apostle Paul as your minister or do you want the Apostle John as your minister?" John might win the majority hands down because he's the apostle of love but he's far more in-your-face than the Apostle Paul seems to be. He says, "If we say we have fellowship with him," could I put that in brass tacks terms? "If we are a member of the church and walk in darkness," then John says, "you lie. You lie and you do not practice the truth." Now, he doesn't mean practice the truth the way you might practice the piano. What he means is that your life is not true.

You are false. You are unreal. You are not the real thing. You're hiding behind a mask and you're deceiving yourself.

Then he says, because he is the apostle of love, there's another side to this, because if it's true that we walk in the light as he is in the light, we bring our sins and our needs whatever they are to him, however deep and dark they may be, however hidden from others. He says, "If we walk in the light as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin." It's true, isn't it? The paradox of belonging to a Christian community is that the readier we are to confess our faults to our heavenly Father and seek his forgiveness, the closer and more intimate our fellowship becomes with our fellow believers. "And," he says, "here is what we discover." Incidentally, this is not the result of us confessing our sins, this is the blessing that is experienced by those who do confess their sins. He says, "And the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin." Every single sin. No matter how dark and how deep. Name it. Name what you think is the worst possible sin. We've all got our favorites, the ones we despise and the people who commit them that we despise. He's saying, "What Jesus Christ did, shedding his blood on the cross of Calvary, is able to bring the forgiveness of sins." Because, look at the words he uses, "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

I mentally take note of the hymns most frequently cited from this pulpit and they vary from season to season depending on what side of the bed the ministers happened to get up on in a six month period. At the moment, it's Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me, I'm pretty sure of that. Do you remember that line in Rock of Ages?

"Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power."

That's what we need. We need both the forgiveness of our sins and the cleansing of our hearts from the dominion of particular sins that we may be free to love and serve our Lord Jesus Christ. You see, the wonder of the situation is this is what John holds out to us in our Savior Jesus Christ. But the tragedy of walking in the darkness is, of course, precisely, that you never see that light. There is not enough light in the darkness for you to know that there is a world of light outside and so you struggle with your sins or you seek therapy for your sins or you do whatever modern people do or you try and hide your sins or silence your sins or compensate for your sins.

John is saying there is a world of grace in our Savior Jesus Christ because he is all-sufficient to bring forgiveness for our sins and power to release us from their grip and so he's encouraging us to walk in the light. I don't think we cite too often when we walk with the Lord in the light of his word, what a glory he sheds on the way. When we do his good will, he abides with us still and with all who will trust and obey. So, what's the secret? It's simple: trust and obey for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey. There is the question. It's a children's question for all ages: are you happy in Jesus? And if not, what are you hiding from him in the dark?

He says fellowship with God is possible only as we walk in the light and second he says, freedom from sin is only possible if we confess it to the Lord. He's thinking here of someone who says in response to all this talk about sin and the shed blood of Jesus, he says in verse 8, "If we say we have no sin." It's possible he's thinking about people – he gives us an indication later on in this letter – that there has been a church split. Not a church plant but a church split and most of us in the room know about church splits one way or another. It may be that part of what produced this church split was that the people who had left were insisting in these words that "we have no sin; we are living on a higher plane altogether from you ordinary Christian believers."

There's a technical name for that, it's called perfectionism and you may have met, I have met this, living breathing forms of this. I remember the first time I think I encountered it, certainly the first time I remember, I met a lady who told me that she hadn't sinned in the previous somewhere between three and six months and I was a much younger man and so the darker side took over and I engaged her in conversation and she was angry and mad and furious at me within the next five minutes. But, of course, that wasn't sin. I mean, I was just the kind of person one ought to get angry and mad and furious with.

You see what John is saying here. He says, "If we say we have no sin," what is it? "We are self-deceived." Self-deceived. But there is a popular version of that and you meet this every day of the week. You meet the first form occasionally in the Christian church but you meet the other form every day of the week. "I would never say I was, I mean, I know I'm not perfect but," the subliminal message is "don't you dare call me a sinner." John is saying, "If you say that you are not a sinner." This is the apostle of love. He is coming alongside you and he's saying to you, "Have you any idea how self-deceived you are?" We say, "No, that's just impossible." Tell a psychologist or a psychiatrist it's impossible to be self-deceived. And there is no greater self-deceit than this: "but I'm not really a sinner."

John says, do you notice when he says, "we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us?" There is a sense in John that when he uses the truth and he just doesn't mean here are these facts, he means reality. Reality isn't in us. It's John's way if John were a hip-hop artist today he would be saying, "Get real because that's exactly what you're not." We're surrounded by this kind of thing, aren't we? I mean, you meet it almost every day of the week. "I'm not really a sinner. I don't need salvation. I'm fine on my own." Ah, dear friend, if you think that, you are utterly self-deceived. You've lost touch with reality and these are not my words. These are the words of John, the apostle of love.

But he says, "If on the other hand we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Do you know what people fear? They fear that if they confess their sins God is going to clobber them on the head. But you see, he's given his only Son on the cross to shed his blood for the forgiveness of our sins. So, says John, there is this glorious – some of you have discovered this, this has been one of the most dominant notes when you first came to faith in Jesus Christ – it was just the most glorious relief and release you had every possibly have experienced because

what you found in the holy light of God because his Son had shed his precious blood for you was that he was faithful to his promise to forgive your sins.

Now, that's wonderful, but what he actually adds to that is if anything, even more wonderful. He says, "Not only is God faithful to forgive our sins because of Christ but he's just to forgive our sins." The forgiveness of sins is a matter of justice to God. Not that you receive his justice for your sins but Christ has received God's justice for your sins and, therefore, amazingly, God says when we come and confess our sins, "I would be unjust if I didn't forgive you your sins." Isn't that something? That the infinitely holy, just, righteous God who hates sin is at his most just when he pardons the sins of those who believe in Jesus. Do you remember – I'm into hymns this week – do you remember Elizabeth Clephane's hymn which is really such a beautiful hymn? It has this marvelous line about the cross that it is the trysting place where heaven's love and heaven's justice meet.

So, he's saying we need to walk in the light if we're to have fellowship with God; we need to experience the confession of our sin if we're to know freedom for it. Then he comes to a third situation and we can deal with this just in a minute, although it's very sad: if we say we have not sinned, then we make him a liar and his word is not in us. Earlier on he'd said if we say that we do not sin then we are the liars but if we say that we have not sinned, we're really standing up and saying, "God, you're the liar and actually I don't care." That's the tragedy. I think that's the reason why John puts a full stop there. In the other two instances, in a way, he kind of holds out gospel hope and gospel grace but to the man or woman or young person who is so stubbornly resistant to the word of the grace of the gospel that exposes my sin and then calls me into repentance and faith to discover the glories of sins forgiven and sin's dominion over my life brought to an end. The one who makes God the liar, then says John, "The word is not in that person and I have nothing more to say." Nothing more to say.

Where did he learn that, incidentally? Where did he learn that there is nothing more to say to some people? Actually, he almost ends this lesson by saying it's possible for somebody to commit a sin for which he says, "I am not encouraging you to pray for that person." Where did he learn this? Actually, he learned it from Jesus. When Jesus was brought, you remember, before Herod. When he was brought before Pontius Pilate, he had a conversation. When he was brought before Herod, he had nothing left to say to him. That, I think, is part of what the Scriptures call the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, when you so resist the testimony of the Spirit to the grace of God in Jesus Christ that you actually don't care any longer. One of the evidences of it or one of the evidences that I was in danger of it, would be that I could sit in church like we're doing today, week after week, month after month, and it really doesn't matter what's said. It's not going to penetrate to me and I'm really saying to God about his word, "You're the liar. I'm the truth," and John is saying his word is not in us. That is the saddest thing in the world.

My friend, if you could be detached from what happens in our services whenever we gather together, you are spiritually in the most dangerous condition of all, but you actually believe you're in the safest position of all, don't you? That's the horror of it. You

think you're absolutely safe because none of it penetrates to you. It doesn't move you. And John is saying, "Oh dear friend, you may be on the verge of God never again speaking to you because you have so pressed him out of your life and said to him," although in our respectable context you would never dream of saying it out loud, "I'm going to treat you as a liar, despise your word and it's going to make no difference to my life." But the good news is, when it penetrates you say, "Oh God, look at me. Be merciful to me a sinner," he brings us the forgiveness of sins, the bliss of this glorious thought that my sins may be forever forgiven and now on I can walk in the light.

Heavenly Father, shine that light upon us we pray. Help us by your grace to confess our sins and lead us to walk in the everlasting way for Jesus our Savior's sake. Amen.