

# **That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life**

## **Principles of Fellowship with God**

*1 John 1:5-2:2*

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# Principles of Fellowship with God

## Scripture

I recently started a sermon series on the Letters of John.

False teaching was infiltrating the churches in the region of Ephesus for which the Apostle John was responsible. The false teachers were teaching that they had a knowledge of God that was available only to the spiritual elite. Moreover, the false teachers were teaching that the body enveloped the spirit and that the deeds of the body could not contaminate the spirit.

This false teaching caused a stir in the churches for which John was responsible. He wrote his letters to do damage control, and also to set down correct teaching for believers.

In today's lesson, John addresses the false teaching by setting down biblical principles of fellowship with God.

Let's read about principles of fellowship with God in 1 John 1:5-2:2:

**<sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup>If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.**

**<sup>2:1</sup>My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we**

**have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.<sup>2</sup> He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:5-2:2)**

## Introduction

My undergraduate degree at the University of Cape Town was a five-year program. The first three years were full-time, and the final two years were part-time. We attended lectures for one and a half days a week, and the other three and a half days we worked as interns in offices scattered throughout the city of Cape Town. I had moved into an apartment with some classmates during my fourth year. I walked a few blocks to the Rondebosch train station and caught the train into Cape Town, where my office was located. One day at the train station, I met a man who was perhaps about forty years old. We struck up a conversation and I came to understand that he had some mild learning disability. Over time, he shared with me that his mother was ill, and it appeared to him that she was dying. However, he was attending a Christian Science Church, and they assured him that the human body and the entire material world were unreal. Therefore, they said, sickness cannot truly exist. I was so angry with the garbage that he was being told that was not allowing his mother to get treatment and that was breaking my friend's heart.

Christian Science teaches a false gospel. And the Gnosticism of the false teachers that John was confronting also proclaims a false gospel. We see John's pastoral concern for his flock in this first letter. He wants them to understand biblical truth and he wants to protect them from false teachers.

## Lesson

First John 1:5-2:2 shows what is involved in having fellowship with God.

Let's use the following outline:

1. A Statement About the Character of God (1:5)
2. Spurious Claims About Fellowship with God (1:6-2:2)

### I. A Statement About the Character of God (1:5)

First, let's note a statement about the character of God.

Question 4 in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* is, "What is God?" This is a question that people have asked for millennia. It is an extremely important question because people want to know who or what is God. The answer given in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* is, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." It is possible, however, to read this definition and come to know something *about* God and still not know *God*.

At the heart of John's controversy with the false teachers was a clear understanding about who or what is God. John's definition is both simple and profound. He writes in 1 John 1:5, **"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."**

The first thing I want to point out is that John did not make up this definition of God himself. He said that it was **"the message we heard from him and proclaim to you."** John was one of the apostles who heard the teaching of Jesus. He was simply passing along to his beloved people what he

heard from Jesus.

The second thing I want to point out is the significance of John's statement about the character of God. No other biblical writer tells us as much about the nature of God than does John. Other writers tell us about what God did. They tell us about what God said. But only John tells us about the character of God in such explicit language. Actually, in his writing, John gives us three striking definitions about what is God. He tells us that "God is spirit" (in John 4:24), "God is light" (in 1 John 1:5), and "God is love" (in 1 John 4:8). These three statements by John give us a comprehensive definition of God.

The third thing I want to point out is the meaning of John's statement here in verse 5. Positively, John says that **"God is light."** I could spend the entire message unpacking what this statement means. But, let me give a summary statement from William Barclay. He says that the statement **"God is light"** tells us that "God is splendor and glory..., that God is self-revealing..., it tells us of God's purity and holiness..., it tells us of the guidance of God..., [and] it tells us of the revealing quality in the presence of God."<sup>1</sup>

Negatively, John says, **"and in him is no darkness at all."** That means that there is no ignorance, falsehood, or error in God. Darkness exists where there is no light.

John was saying that the false teachers did not have a correct understanding of the character of God. Had they properly understood the nature and character of God, they would not have propagated their false teaching about God.

Let me apply this point as follows. Do you know God? Do you know who God is? Do you know what is God? Do

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 29.

you know that God is light? And do you know that in him there is no darkness at all? Your understanding of God and his ways will be improved to the extent that you rightly understanding the character of God.

## II. Spurious Claims About Fellowship with God (1:6-2:2)

And second, let's examine spurious claims about fellowship with God.

John wants his beloved flock to understand the implications that flow out of a right understanding of the character of God. He does so, however, by addressing the spurious claims of the false teachers. John addresses three spurious claims. Each spurious claim in verses 6, 8, and 10 begins with the words, "If we say...." John's answer to each spurious claim is given in verses 7, 9, and chapter 2:1.

So, let's examine the spurious claims about fellowship with God.

### A. *The Denial That Sin Breaks Our Fellowship with God (1:6-7)*

The first spurious claim about fellowship with God is the denial that sin breaks our fellowship with God.

John writes in verse 6, **"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."** They professed to have fellowship with God and to know him spiritually, even though they lived in sin. John says that they are lying and do not live by the truth.

I grew up with newspapers that came daily to the house. My favorite page was the sports page. My next favorite page was the cartoons page. And one of my favorite cartoons was

Andy Capp. Andy was an unemployed, lazy bum who spent a lot of time at his local pub. One day, while walking the street, Andy ran into his local vicar. The minister said to Andy, “It’s never too late t’ make a fresh start, Mister Capp – promise me you’ll try.”

Looking a little embarrassed, Andy said, “I promise.”

Encouraged by his response, the minister said, “Good lad! You’ll stop your gambling, and you’ll pay off all your debts?”

Andy quickly replied, “Ang on Vicar – one minute yer talkin’ *religion* an’ the next yer talking *business!*”

Though we don’t have the Gnostic heresy around today, we still have people who claim to have fellowship with God but do not have that impact their walk with God. John Stott rightly says, “Religion without morality is an illusion.”<sup>2</sup>

Having refuted the spurious claim, John gives the complementary truth in verse 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.”** To **“walk in the light, as he is in the light”** means that our goal is to live in a way that honors and pleases God.

When I go to the dentist, I lie down on the chair. The dentist turns on a powerful light so that he can examine my teeth and work on them. He needs the light to see clearly.

Similarly, I want to walk in the light so that God can work on me. I want him to expose my sin. I want him to expose areas in my life that displease him.

Now, when I do that, John says that two results follow. First, **“we have fellowship with one another.”** Now, we may

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<sup>2</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 79.

have expected John to say that we will have fellowship with God. But John takes it a step further. Walking in the light certainly results in fellowship with God, but I think he is stressing that this claim is most clearly seen in having fellowship with one another. That is why spending time with each other is so important. We demonstrate love and care and help and understanding when we are in personal communion with each other.

The second result is that **“the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”** Walking the light is only possible because **“the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”** The verb **“cleanses”** is in the present tense, which shows that it is a continuous process.

*B. The Denial That Sin Exists in Our Nature (1:8-9)*

The second spurious claim about fellowship with God is the denial that sin exists in our nature.

John writes in verse 8, **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”** The false teachers were claiming to be perfect. To **“have no sin”** means more than committing sin. It refers to an inner principle in which acts of sin are the outward expression. Such a claim of perfectionism is a self-deception. Moreover, such a claim of perfectionism shows that **“the truth is not in us.”**

A large majority of people assert that people are basically good. This is especially true for babies. Many people believe that babies come into the world as basically good. They believe that babies are at least neutral concerning sin. But this is exactly what John is referring to in this verse. Every person is born with a sinful nature. And it is from that sinful nature that we commit acts of sin. So, let us be clear that every one of us has a sinful nature, and that it is from that sinful nature that we



commit acts of sin.

The proper response to sin is not to deny it, but to admit it so that God's remedy may be applied. That is what John writes in verse 9, **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** The first thing to note is that John uses the plural for **"sins."** John wants believers not merely to acknowledge that they sin in general, or that they have a sinful nature. No. He wants believers to acknowledge individual acts of sin. Believers need to examine themselves so that they may confess specific sins to God. And because God is **"faithful and just,"** he forgives us our specific sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. John does not say how God does that, but surely he still has verse 7 in mind. It is **"the blood of Jesus his Son [that] cleanses us from all sin."** Nothing but the blood of Jesus removes the stain of sin.

*C. The Denial That Sin Shows Itself in Our Conduct (1:10-2:2)*

And the third spurious claim about fellowship with God is the denial that sin shows itself in our conduct.

John writes in verse 10, **"If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."** I can only recall one time when I met a person who claimed to be perfect. He claimed that he had never sinned in his life. Most people will acknowledge, perhaps not in public but in private, that they are not perfect. They admit that they are sinners. However, when pressed about the conduct of their sin, one discovers that they will admit to peccadilloes, that is, to relatively minor faults. The problem is that they have lowered the bar so low that they believe that they can surpass its measure. However, God's standard, God's bar, is perfection. When we measure ourselves

against God's law, we discover that we fall short of measuring up to it at all.

Before John gives the complementary truth to the spurious claim, he says in 1 John 2:1a, **“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.”** Here we see John's pastoral heart. He refers to his flock as **“my little children.”** He really cares about them. And he wants them to know that a sinful life does not characterize the believer.

But John also knows that no believer is perfect in this life. And so he goes on to write, **“But if anyone does sin...”** (2:1b). And then John tells his flock about two wonderful provisions that God has given for the believer who sins.

*The first provision for the believer who sins is an advocate.* John writes in verse 1b, **“we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”** This is legal language. Allow me to give all of you a public service announcement. Every one of you is going to stand before the Judge of the Universe after you die. Your accuser, Satan, is going to accuse you of breaking God's law. You are going to need the best advocate you can get to help you answer the charges against you. The good news for the believer is that **“we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”** Moreover, he will serve you pro bono, that is, without charge. Furthermore, he will not argue that you are not guilty, for he knows that you are guilty. He will confirm that you are guilty of all your sin. However, he will say that the Father should not send you to hell because Jesus has already paid the penalty for your sin. Therefore, the Father cannot punish you because he has already punished Jesus. So, the key to having Jesus as your advocate is that you have submitted your life to him and believe him.

*And the second provision for the believer who sins is propitiation.* John writes in verse 2, **“He is the propitiation for our sins,**

**and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”** The word **“propitiation”** is used only twice in the Bible, once here in 1 John 2:2 and the other time in 1 John 4:10. Propitiation has to do with the removal of God’s wrath. The great aim is to have fellowship with God. But sin has broken fellowship with God. So, an offering must be given to appease the wrath of God. The Jews offered – morning and night – a sin offering in the Temple. These animals were sacrificed day after day, week after week, year after year for millennia. And it all came to an end in the final propitiatory offering in the person of Jesus when he died on the cross at Calvary.

Jesus removed the wrath of God by bearing it on the cross on our behalf. He also did so **“for the sins of the whole world.”** That does not mean that Jesus paid for the sins of every individual. John is not a universalist. It does mean that a universal pardon is offered for the sins of people in the whole world and is enjoyed by those who receive it.

## Conclusion

Let us examine ourselves to make sure that we do have fellowship with God.

In the second stanza of “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” we sing these words, “Did we in our own strength confide / Our striving would be losing; / Were not the right One on our side / The Man of God’s own choosing. / Dost ask who that may be? / Christ Jesus, it is He; / Lord Sabaoth is His name, / From age to age the same, / And He must win the battle.” Let us be sure that Jesus is our Advocate and Propitiation so that we may have fellowship with God. Amen.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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