

The Cornerstone of Joy

1 John

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Bible Text: 1 John 1:5-7
Preached on: Sunday, June 17, 2012

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This morning, I'm really even more urgently pleased and excited to come back to the book of 1 John with you this morning because I'm so confident what the Lord has for us in his word is going to encourage you and enrich you and at the same time challenge you in your thinking about life, in your thinking about what it means to be a Christian. When you read the Scriptures and when you take the word of God seriously, when you have been born again from above and God has done a work in your heart, there are consequences to that and there is a life transformation that flows from being born again that continues in ever increasing degrees until you die and go home to be with the Lord in heaven, and that is to be an expected part of the Christian life. People who are growing in Christ, people who are growing in their spiritual maturity, they find that they have a greater depth of understanding and appreciation for the holiness of God, that God is greater and purer and more righteous than they realized when they first came to faith. Then one of the corollaries of that as you grow in that knowledge of God, as you grow in your spiritual development, another corollary of that is that you realize that you are more sinful and that sin more thoroughly dominates and permeates your being than you realized when you first came to Christ. Paul as an apostle said, talked in Romans 7 about the struggle that he had with the evil that was still within him. He wrestled with remaining sin. He said, "The good that I want to do, I don't do, and the evil that I don't want to do, I do, I practice," and it's all very much a conflict in his own soul and those who are growing Christians realize that. If you find as a Christian, you recognize more and more sin in your life when you thought you were growing, understand that that is a part of what is to be expected. That is a natural part of the growth in Christian life. As you grow in the Christian life, your estimation of the greatness and the holiness and righteousness of God elevates and your understanding of the way in which you fall short deepens. As you become more holy and sanctified in your life, you actually become more and more conscious of remaining and indwelling sin. And if that has been your experience and you know that, understand that recognizing that sin is a natural part of spiritual growth. It's actually a sign of life. That doesn't mean that you don't repent of it, of course you repent of it but just to realize that this is what the Bible tells us to expect.

Now, there is a consequence to that. There is a consequence to that. To be a Christian, among other things, to be a Christian means that you seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness as the predominant priority of your life; that that is the animating

principle of your existence is that, "I want to know God's righteousness and his kingdom is what matters to me far above any aspects of my earthly existence." That's just the nature of the love and priority of the affection of the redeemed heart. God saved us in order to give him that kind of affection. That's what's supposed to happen. Well, in the midst of those priorities, as we kind of segue into our message for this morning, it means that you and I as Christians must take time to think about our own souls as a regular part of our spiritual lives. You need to be thinking about the condition of your soul. You need to be examining your heart and keeping tabs on where your affections are so that they are squarely centered on the holiness and righteousness of God, and that you're not getting distracted and drifting off into things that don't really matter, or even worse, drifting off into patterns of sin.

Now listen, and I say this by way of encouragement to you this morning, understand that that aspect of self-examination is not a pleasant process. When you go to the doctor and you go for a physical, he pokes and he probes and he does things that are uncomfortable, and when you're a Christian, that's what the Bible does to you spiritually. The Bible pokes you and it probes you and it searches your heart in order to expose the spiritual growth that is remaining; to prod you into greater spiritual growth, and that's what the Bible does. The Bible acts like a doctor on our souls, a doctor doing a physical exam. The Bible is continually examining you spiritually when you're reading it in a serious way, not just superficially, not treating it lightly, not treating it as a five-minute a day, verse a day keeps the devil away kind of thing. The idea of reading the Scriptures and searching out the word of God is that it would take place at a profound level in your thinking and in your affections.

And here's what happens when you do that, inevitably here's what happens when you do that, as you search the Scriptures, as you meditate on the character of a holy and righteous God, something inevitably is going to happen. As you think up and then you think in, as it were, you are inevitably going to see a gap between biblical standards of righteousness and where your life is at. The pure standard of the word of God is going to expose the remaining sin and dirt in your own life and this is true for every Christian. And as you see that gap, your response to that should be one of humility, one that submits to the instruction of the word of God on your soul, and yet at the same time, you go further and you see the need to repent because when that gap is exposed, when that gap between who you are and what God calls you to be is brought to your attention, that is a point of repentance and it is a point of opportunity for spiritual growth and we have to embrace that individually. We have to embrace that as what God has called us to do. God has called us to the pursuit of righteousness, personal, individual, internal, growing righteousness as the point of our existence. It's by growing in righteousness that we elevate and honor the name of Christ. He saved us in order to conform us to the image of Christ.

Well, the fact that there needs to be a conforming presupposes that there is a falling short in your life and in mine. That's the nature of it and, beloved, I would say without fear of contradiction and from speaking from personal experience, that is painful. It hurts. It's uncomfortable. It is a direct assault on the natural man. It is a direct assault on your pride

and mine to realize how far short we fall as the word of God brings our soul out of the shadows and into the light of an understanding of the knowledge of Christ. It's painful but that is how you grow and that's what God has called you to do, and we embrace that process. We embrace that painful process so that we can continually offer an increasingly pure devotion that is worthy of Christ. We understand and we pursue that process. We embrace it because we so love the Lord Jesus Christ who laid down his innocent blood, shed his innocent blood on our behalf, to rescue our souls from the damnation that they deserved.

So of course we embrace whatever it takes to become more like him. We don't cling to our sin, we don't resist the process of growth because it's uncomfortable, we are motivated to pursue Christ and to pursue that kind of spiritual growth and repentance because we so love the Lord Jesus Christ and we find him so lovely in our sight that we want to be like him and we want to move toward him, not away from him. We're not content to stay and wallow in the muck of our current spiritual existence, we want to move and to be increasingly cleansed so that we can be more and more like Christ and live in a more and more conscience union with him, right? You want that or you wouldn't be here if you have been here more than once or twice and so we have to understand what's in front of us.

Now, with that said, to say that it's painful is not to say that it's miserable. You know, this pain is a good thing and there is joy that is mixed into it. There is a joy in following Christ as we come closer and closer to him. And last time in 1 John, we saw as we were talking about this, that the Gospel has a transforming impact on us. It is common just to think of the Gospel as a one time proclamation, someone makes a decision and we go on and that's supposedly the Gospel. No, no, no, no. That's not what the Bible talks about at all. The Gospel has a continuing ongoing impact on our lives as believers. As we recognize all of the elements of the Gospel and we work them out in our thinking and in our lives, there is an ongoing transforming effect that it has on us. We saw that last time in verses 3 and 4.

Look at them with me, chapter 1, verses 3 and 4. We talked about how the Gospel has a transforming impact on us and this is just by way of quick review. John said, "what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete." That's the passage that we looked at last time and what we said was that the Apostle John was writing in order to accomplish at this point in his letter two different purposes. He was writing to promote fellowship amongst the believers, to enhance and develop and deepen their common life in Christ. True Christians share the life of Christ. We are in union with him and that's why we connect so naturally with each other, is that there is a transcendent life principle that animates true Christians that just connects when Christians gather together. So as we gather together, we share in that common life and the sharing of that common life is what the word fellowship is describing there in verse 3. And we grow in that fellowship, we grow in that common life as we come into greater contact with the truth, as we grow in

understanding of the truth, and as we conform our lives to what we understand from God's word. John is writing to enhance that growth.

But look at verse 4. Along with that, a corollary of that, he says, "These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete." The common life that we share in Christ, the life that you have as an individual believer in Christ, promotes a continuing state of joy, an ever increasing, an ever deepening state of joy, of settled contentment that is independent of your life circumstances. John is writing to believers who were being troubled by false teachers and he's writing to assure them of the reality of their salvation and to promote in them a conscious sense of joy that would sustain them in the midst of the struggle. We said that the book of 1 John is written to promote spiritual victory in a hostile world and part of that spiritual victory is living with a joyful attitude even though circumstances and indwelling sin assault us and seek to bring us down and so this common life in Christ produces a continuing state of joy that is rooted in the reality of our common fellowship with God the Father, and that will yield to an even greater joy at the consummation of our salvation when we all end up around the throne of Christ in heaven. Now, how could you not have a joyful response to that? If you believe that and you know in your heart that you have that kind of new life, that you've had that new birth, that you belong to Christ and as we sang earlier, he belongs to you, then that is a greater more transcendent reality than any circumstances that we're going through right now, right?

So that reality is the root and the foundation of our fellowship and of our joy and just in four quick verses, John had brought all of that out to our attention. And what we said last time, what we closed with last time, was that in light of all of that there is one predominant thought that should be going through your mind in response. As you understand these truths, there should be an ever dawning realization upon you that continually motivates you to love God and Christ all the more and it's this and it's so simple: if all of that is true, if God has shared his life with us and God is preparing us for an even greater weight of eternal glory that is yet to be revealed to us, then no matter what else is happening in your life or in mine, you can know for certain that God's intentions toward you are good. That has to be true. You cannot look at Jesus Christ hanging on the cross, suffering and shedding his life blood for your sins without being overwhelmed by the thought that this God-man's intentions toward me are good. He saves you in order to bless you. He saves you in order to secure your heavenly good, to give you joy now and to bring you to glory in the future. So there should be a settled and ever deepening recognition in your heart and mind that whatever else is happening, even if I don't understand, there is a clear, conscious, settled conviction in my heart that the God of the universe has good intentions upon me. He saved you in order to bless you. That's what John is saying in those opening verses.

Now, that's all by way of review. Keep all of those thoughts in mind if your head can expand that much, keep all of those thoughts in your mind as we read today's passage as we come to verses 5 through 7 which is our real text here this morning. Look at verse 5 with me. I'll read the three verses to kind of set them in your mind. This is all enormously foundational to living the Christian life and to understanding what it means to be a Christian. Verse 5, I read out of and I preach out of the New American Standard version

for those of you that are visitors and so if your Bible seems a little bit different, that's why. I'm reading out of the New American Standard version. Verse 5,

5 This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 7 but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

We'll stop there. Do you want to know joy? Is that something that you would like to have? Here is what you need to see in today's message. It is a simple observation but it is terribly profound. For some of you, it will be a seismic shift in the way that you think about life and the way that you think about the pursuit of joy in the Christian life. You need to start with this simple observation and we'll unfold points in the message as we go along. The first point this morning is this: is that your joy starts with the holiness of God. Joy is rooted in the holiness of God. That is where the foundation, the cornerstone of joy is found, it's found in the holiness of God.

Go back to verse 5, let's read it again and then I'll tie it into what went before in just a moment. This passage starts out this way, "This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." He's making a foundational statement about the very essence of God in this verse. He says that God is light. You so often hear people say, "God is love. God is love." That is true. John says it in chapter 4 of this very book, but less often emphasized is this statement that God is light. That is where John starts as he is seeking to promote joy amongst his readers, that God is light. He is using a metaphor there. He is using a picture and what does the picture mean? What does it mean that God is light? This is a statement that says that God is holy and God is true; that there is a purity and a righteousness intrinsic to his very essence that defines his very being and you can see that that's what light means by the way John unfolds its meaning in verses 6 and 7.

Notice that he says, "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." What do you mean that there is no darkness? What does this metaphor of light mean? Well, notice that he contrasts it with sin. He contrasts it with walking in the darkness in verse 6. He is true. He contrasts it with lying in verse 6. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him," who is light, "and yet walk in the darkness, we're lying and we do not practice the truth." Light is set in opposition to darkness. Truth is set in opposition to deception. Holiness is set in opposition to sin. You see that in verse 7, "Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." So by the way that he works out the metaphor you can see what he means by this fundamental statement that God is light. He's saying that God is holy, God is true, God is righteous.

Now, what does that have to do with anything that we've been talking about? John says, he said in verse 4, "We write these things so that our joy may be made complete." Verse 5, "This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light." Well, what? What? Did he just suddenly change the subject? Did he suddenly just start

talking about something different? First he's talking about our joy and then he shifts to something unrelated to talk about the holiness of God? Is that what he did? Was his flow of thought so disjointed that there is no linear connection between verse 4 and verse 5? Well, listen, a lot of Bibles put a paragraph break between verses 4 and verse 5, in some Bibles, there is a whole new heading between verses 4 and verse 5, and it gives you the impression as a reader of the English Bible that what is said in verse 5 is unrelated to what is said in verse 4. That would be a tragic mistake for you to make in your thinking as you read this passage. That would be a tragedy of immense proportions. John is continuing his flow of thought and stick with me here because I want you to see the structure of the text here because what he is teaching us is so fundamental to living the Christian life that you can't miss this point and successfully live as a Christian. Everything is at stake with what we're talking about here.

Now, I want you to see that there is no break in his thought and it's very easy to show you that. First of all, look at verse 3, he said, "what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you, so that you may have fellowship with us, our fellowship is with the Father." Okay? Verses 3 and 4, fellowship. Notice this, notice this, don't tell me there's a paragraph break here. Verse 6, he uses the same word. There is continuity in his language and in his flow of thought. He says, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." Verse 7, "if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." All I'm wanting you to see right here is that there is a continuity of thought as shown by the repeated language, the repeated term "fellowship" that he uses. He is emphasizing this fellowship, this common life in Christ both before the statement about the holiness of God and after the statement about the holiness of God. There is continuity in what he is saying here.

Now, stay with me here. We're building up to something important here. Not only that, sometimes I very rarely will add things that are evident in the Greek text but here it really needs to be done. In verse 5, as I read it in the NASB version, it starts out, "This is the message," right? In the Greek text, there is a critical word there that really helps your understanding. The Greek text starts with the word "and." It's joining together verse 5 with what went before in verse 4. So the way that it literally reads in the Greek text, John says in verse 4, "These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete and this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." John intends for verse 4 and verse 5 to be connected together in your thinking. That's why he uses the word "and." He doesn't use a disjunctive conjunction. He doesn't contrast it. He doesn't sharply change. He is continuing what he was saying and this is so essential for your Christian life. What we're talking about right here, this little grammatical point is essential for your well-being as a Christian. It is essential.

Understand what happens. John had just said in verse 4, "I want you to know this joy. I want you to know this fellowship." And where does he go? He doesn't suddenly change direction in his thought, he is building on that. He is motivated by a heart passion that Christians would know joy in their walk with Christ in the midst of a hostile world. So he

immediately points them and he says, "And here's what supports your joy. Here is what the foundation of your joy is, it is this message that God is Light and in him there is no darkness at all." So John says, "I want you to know joy," and then he immediately starts by talking about the essential character of God. And even more specifically, not just the essential character of God, he talks about the holiness of God, and by the structure of his letter itself, he is teaching you that the holiness of God is essential to your ongoing joy.

Now, I'm going to show you how that works out. I'm going to show you why that must be true in terms of just thinking it out. All I want you to see right now is the structure in the argument of the text. This is what John is saying, "I want you to know joy. Let me talk to you about the holiness of God." That's his point. His great point, his goal is promoting your joy and then he starts to support it in his argument by saying, "If we're going to talk about your joy, the first thing we need to talk about is the holiness of God, not your circumstances." Your circumstances have nothing to do with your experience of joy. None whatsoever. It is totally independent. Those are two independent thoughts and your right thinking about God is what promotes joy in your circumstances. It doesn't go the other direction.

So what are we saying here? What are we saying here? The starting point for your Christian joy is not the pursuit of your desires. It has nothing to do with what you want. That's not where it starts. The question is, here you are in the middle of life, you're in your 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, how much further do I need to keep going? I'll stop there. I'm getting, Charlie and Bonnie are saying, "Keep going. Keep going." 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s. Somewhere in there I covered them, okay? You know, we've all been conditioned through life to think a certain way. We don't even really stop to think about why we think the way that we do and so this text is coming to us in the middle of life, in the middle of a long history of thinking a certain way, of conditioning our life to pursue things the way that we want to pursue them. What we're saying here is that we've got to step back and think about the way that we think. We have to step back and take a very fundamental assessment of what it is that drives our worldview. What is it that drives your interpretation of everything that happens to you in life. That's what we're talking about here. What is the controlling principle of your interpretation of how life is going for you? What John is saying here is that your fundamental principle so that you could have joy in the midst of your shifting circumstances, is that you would have this fundamental premise controlling everything else and it's a settled recognition of the holiness of God. That is where Christian joy starts. It starts with a settled recognition of the holiness of God. Any other point, anything else that you start your thinking with is going to eventually lead you to spiritual disaster. If you start your thinking here that God is righteous, sovereign, holy, majestic, and you start your thinking there and then interpret all of life from it, then you have an unshakable unchanging foundation for joy. That's the way it works.

So let me state this plainly at the start. I've been going 30 minutes and I'm still saying this is the start. That could be bad. Two things. One is that in the midst of your sorrows, trials, difficult relationships, all of that, you have to realize and we all rightly want to have joy that transcends that, we don't like living under the crush of our circumstances. No one likes that. What you have to understand is that to know the kind of joy that the Bible is

talking about is that your thinking and your aim cannot be for a change in your circumstances as if that will bring joy. That might bring temporary relief but understand this: when you really think it through, a change in circumstances does not help you spiritually at all. A change in circumstances will not help you have settled permanent abiding joy and confidence and peace as you look to the future because even if you wiped the slate clean on your circumstances and everything that troubles your mind as you walked in here today, if all of that could go away and it was just happiness, listen, all that does is expose you to what is going to change tomorrow that might threaten that realm of external satisfaction. So it can't be. If the Christian life means anything, joy cannot be rooted in and intrinsically wound up in your circumstances. It can't be that way. It has to be something else because even if you could change them, tomorrow might change it right back. There might be a car accident waiting for one of us just on the way out here that just turns everything all around, or a phone call that comes. Listen, the Christian life cannot be and is not something that is that vulnerable to attack from circumstances. The joy that John is talking about, this abiding word of God that he wrote 2,000 years ago, would be meaningless if it was subject to the whim of circumstance in our lives.

So the question is, if it's not my circumstances, if it's not really about what my life is like, then what is it that promotes my joy? Let me state this plainly and this is going to pinch some of your hearts, it certainly has pinched mine as I've thought about this. If you suffer from a chronic lack of joy, if you suffer from a chronic lack of joy in your life, understand this: you are not thinking rightly about the character of God. If you suffer from a chronic ongoing lack of joy, you are not thinking rightly about the character of God and I'll show you that as we go along here. John says, "I write so that your joy be made complete. Let me tell you as a matter of first principle, God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." That's the connection. So when John was addressing the lack of joy in his readers, he didn't say, "Hey, chin up. You know, circumstances could change. It could get better tomorrow." None of that. Joy is tied into the holiness of God. Now, I just say that and leave that so that you can see it.

Deuteronomy 32:4 says this, speaking about the holiness of God. What does the Bible say about this holiness of God? Deuteronomy 32, speaking of God, it says, "The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He." Job 34:10, "Far be it from God to do wickedness, And from the Almighty to do wrong." You see, when we're talking about God, we're talking about the one who rules the universe, not just in a macro sense but he rules and orchestrates and works through and in the circumstances of your individual life. There is a person that is working through your circumstances and orchestrating them to accomplish his eternal purpose. Your thinking about life has to start there.

Now, having started with that, that's what it means to be God. You know, God is God. It means he's over all. Now, the question is, the question for you as a Christian is this: what is that person like that is orchestrating the circumstances of my life? Who is in providential control of every detail that happens to me? What is he like? Well, I've got good news for you: the God who orchestrates and controls your circumstances, that God is light. He is holy. He is righteous. He is good. He is true. He is perfect. There is no

wickedness in him. So everything that he is doing in your life as a believer in Jesus Christ is an outflow of his holiness. It's an outflow of his perfection of character. It's an outflow of his righteousness. And that means that you start your thinking with, "God is in control, this God is righteous, he is perfect, there is no wickedness in him, and therefore whatever is happening in my life is an outworking of his good and righteous purposes in my life," because it could be no other way, because nothing can contradict the holiness of God.

So, what this means is that you and I have to step back from life and think about what is it that controls our thinking. What is it that motivates the way, what is it that determines the way that we think about life. Well, what God intends, what the Scriptures call you to do is to think about life through the great prism of the holiness of God. You view life from the first principle of God's holiness and you work out the implications from there. If you start from any other starting point, if you say, "I want to be happy and these circumstances are bad therefore I'm not happy therefore I'm not joyful," if your first principle is your own desire for happiness, you're going to be short-circuited in your Christian life. Any other starting point other than the holiness of God is going to distort your vision just like putting on bad prescription eyeglasses is going to distort your physical vision. If you put my glasses on, things would be blurry for you because the lens through which you are looking would be distorted, not shaped by the right factors. When you think about life, you must think about life from the context of the holiness of God. You see, God created you so that you could glorify him and enjoy him forever. Basic truth. That enjoyment of him, that honoring him, starts with proper thinking about him. It begins with a proper estimation of his flawless character. He reigns over the the universe in holiness. He rules over the world with intrinsic righteousness. He always does all things well. That's where you start your thinking.

Now, belabored the point there. That's okay. Theoretically, most of you in this room who have been Christians for any period of time, most of you would probably say, "I believe that. I affirm the holiness of God. I am committed to the holiness of God. Of course, why are you belaboring this point?" Our challenge is this and this is where the dynamic of Christian growth that I was talking about at the start comes into play. This is where the challenge and the pain and the probing of the Bible comes into play. I say without fear of much contradiction, our challenge is to see the gap between what we say in response to things like this and what we truly are. What we say and what we are are two different things. When I put the issue of the holiness of God in front of anyone who remotely embraces the Bible as a Christian, you're going to say, "Yes, I believe that. I affirm that." But here you are saying that and yet dealing with a chronic lack of joy in your life. Do you see the disconnect? There is something wrong there. How could you have a clear view of the glory of God and be in despair in response to that?

Let me clarify something. Our goal here this morning, what we're talking about, we're not talking about an artificial appearance of joy before men. You know, we've all been in churches that tried to do that and they generate it artificially from the platform and turn up the volume and turn down the lights and everybody starts clapping and as if that were joy. That's not what I'm talking about at all. What I'm talking about when we talk about joy is how do you view life, how do you think about life Monday through Saturday?

What is your reaction to the challenges and changes that come in life? That's what we're talking about. That's where joy matters. Not what can be artificially reproduced in a secular rock concert. Let's talk about life as the Bible talks about it here. We're talking about the inner reality of joy when you think about life.

So we've talked about holiness. You'd all kind of voice some kind of an agreement with me even if you say, "Oh, I'm not quite sure everything you mean here but yeah, it sounds good to me." But what we need to do and this is all designed to help you, we need to poke around a little bit. We need to poke around a little bit to help you see the gap between what you say you believe about the holiness of God and where your heart is really at in the thinking about the holiness of God. So we're going to prod a little bit, not to make you feel guilty but to get you healthy. The only way the doctor can cure the disease is to poke and prod and do some tests until the symptoms come out, right? It's the same thing spiritually. There is nothing new here. Jesus even compared himself to a physician in Luke 5.

So what we say is that joy starts with the holiness of God. You have to start there in your thinking. That's the fundamental principle but let's talk about life right now, and here's the second point. The second point here for you this morning. This one is going to hurt but this is it: you may love God's holiness, you might love God's holiness if you want to put it that way, you might love God's holiness less than you think. You might not be so devoted to the holiness of God as you like to think that you are. You might not be as devoted to the holiness of God as you create the appearance before men on Sunday morning. That just might be true. I want to give you a couple of ways to test yourself on this. Jesus said that our lives reflect what's going on in our hearts, right? He said that the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart. A good tree brings forth good fruit, a bad tree brings forth bad fruit. The point is that what you see going on on the outside is a reflection of what's going on on the inside. Okay? Simple principle. Simple principle. Now, how does that relate to the holiness of God? Well, the question is this: what is it that's coming out of your life as a Christian? I'm not challenging your salvation here in what I say. If the Spirit of God convicts you to the contrary, that's great, but I'm speaking to you assuming the reality of your Christian profession as we talk here. I'm talking to you as a brother in Christ seeking to help you think through these things. We have to examine ourselves and let me give you three questions, maybe four, that will help you assess the way that you truly esteem God's holiness. We're going to get beyond simply affirming these things with our lips and looking at what it is that our lives truly testify about your view of holiness. What is it that you really think about the character of God? How much of a priority is his character really to the affections of your heart? And these things are simple, they're obvious, and the answers will be evident to you.

First of all, so I'm going to ask you three questions. They are going to be framed a little bit negatively but that's okay. First of all, we're saying you may love God's holiness less than you think. How can I make such a terrible accusation against such fine people here on Sunday morning? First question: do your prayers expose a low view of God? Do your prayers expose a low view of God in your life?

Turn over to the book of Matthew 6. One day in the coming months or not in the too far distant future of our life, we'll go through this section where Jesus taught us to pray. I look forward to that time so we'll just touch on it here for now. In Matthew 6:9, Jesus taught us how to pray. He taught his disciples how they were to pray. He instructed us, "This is how I want you to pray." It says in verse 9, Matthew 6:9, turn there if you're not there because you need to see this. He says, "Pray in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.'" What do you see there? What you see there and what Jesus instructs us on how to pray is at the start a completely God-centered approach to praying. He says, "I want you to pray, first of all, by honoring God in your prayers." The first request that comes out of your mouth as you address him as your heavenly Father is, "Father, bless your name. Hallowed, praise be to the holy name of the majestic God to whom I'm praying." Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. "Lord, I'm not so wrapped up in this life that I'm not looking to the future when Christ returns and establishes his reign on earth. I want your kingdom to come, not only in the future but I want to see other people come into the spiritual kingdom of God as well." Your will be done. "Father, what I really desire more than anything else is not that circumstances would go my way but I want them to go your way. I pray that you would accomplish your will in this world that you have created for your glory. I want your will to be done in my life. Father, I pledge to you my obedience today to your moral will, to honor you with the life that I live." That's how Jesus taught us to pray.

Now, I'm not talking about prayer so much here as making a broader point. Here's all that I want you to see out of that, is that Jesus when he taught us to pray, taught us to put God at the center right from the start. There is a sequence to what he says and it's a God-centered approach in the first two verses of that model prayer and only then, he says in verse 11, do you pray for your physical needs; verse 12 and 13, you pray for your spiritual needs, for forgiveness and all of that. Jesus said, "Seek his kingdom and his will. Praise him. Only then do you turn to your physical and spiritual needs." That's how Jesus taught us to pray.

Now, stay with me here. Question for you: how did you pray this past week? What was it that you were praying to God about if you prayed at all? Where did the honor of God find expression in your prayer life? Where did the overflow of a heart that was humbled by his holiness, enraptured by the greatness of his being, full of gratitude for his work of salvation, where did that find expression in your prayer life in the past week, in the past month, in the past six months? How far back do you want to extend it? Where did the honor of God find expression in the way that you spoke to him? There is one word that I would say at this point: ouch. That stings, doesn't it? It stings. But the point is this, we're like a doctor here this morning, we're trying to look at symptoms to identify a greater reality and the point is this and you must understand this: your prayer life demonstrates what your priorities are. Your prayer life indicates what you think is most important. And your priorities, your life priorities, the things that most matter to your heart are the things that you said first to God and the things that you said most to God. There is no evading that.

So, a shriveled prayer life that is focused on, "God, I've got this problem. Help me with this problem. I just want help. I want relief from this problem." Or even better yet, "God, that person over there is the problem. Would you send down your arm of wrath upon them and change them? And Lord, this circumstance and this person..." Well, excuse me? Excuse me? Do you realize who you're talking to? Don't you want to stop and consider the majesty of the one to whom you are praying? Isn't the Creator of your soul, isn't the Redeemer of your soul, isn't the one who secured your eternal salvation worthy of a word of acknowledgment that is independent of your circumstances? Isn't he worthy of many words of thanks? Many words of praise? "Oh God, I remember who you are as I come before you this morning and I honor you. Yeah, I've got these dumpy little things but, Lord, that doesn't matter. I love you. Your holiness enraptures my soul." You don't have to be that demonstrative to get the point. Your prayer life manifests how prominent and how important the holiness of God truly is in your life. You cannot avoid that point and a selfishly oriented prayer life is a reflection of a life that is not enamored with the holiness of God. There is no way around that.

Now, here's the point. Stick with me. I don't know how long I'm going to go today. The point of all of this is that this is a diagnostic measure for you to apply to your own soul. The point is to help you see that you probably don't really start with the holiness of God in your affections and in your thinking like you say that you do otherwise you would pray differently. If it was the dominant priority of your life, the glory of God was the dominant thing, then it would come out when you were in his presence. You'd seek his presence out and you'd want to express that just like you wanted to express your love in those early days of dating your mate before you got married. That's what love does and so if your prayer life is shriveled on this, understand that what it's showing you is that you don't really love the holiness of God like you say you do, like you think you do. Even sincerely thinking it, your prayer life betrays what you're really like and I say that not to make you feel guilty but to help you see where the opportunity for growth is, to help you see where the affections of your heart lie. And I ask you this question gently and I've had to deal with it myself: do you need to repent in light of that? And we're not just talking about repenting of a lousy prayer life, we're talking about something more fundamental. We're talking about recognizing in the innermost part of your being that you don't revere and esteem the holiness of God like you should otherwise you'd pray differently. You'd have to pray different, right? You get the point.

Secondly. So I'm not saying, "Okay, go out and pray now for an hour and a half." That is not the point at all. The whole point is to see where your heart's at and repent at that fundamental level. The second question for you this morning: does your response to trials expose a low view of God? Does your response to trials expose a low view of God? If you are marked, as I often am, by a grumbling or fainting spirit in the midst of your trials, you can know for certain that you have lost sight somewhere in the past, you have lost sight of the holiness of God. When you grumble against your circumstances, when you feel the load is just too awful for you to bear and you see no ray of light in it, I say this to help you and to encourage you, not to condemn you, understand that you've lost sight of the holiness of God somewhere in the midst of it.

Look at the book of Lamentations between the book of Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the Old Testament. Page 831 in my Bible if that helps you out. If it doesn't help, check the table of contents. Lamentations 3:39. In the midst of the destruction of Jerusalem, the prophet said this, Lamentations 3:39 and 40, he said, "Why should any living mortal, or any man, Offer complaint in view of his sins? Let us examine and probe our ways, And let us return to the LORD." Now, here's the point. I'm talking about this grumbling spirit in response to trials. When you love the holiness of God, when it is clear in your mind that he is orchestrating circumstances to advance your good, then you know, you know because you've started with that first principle of the holiness of God, you know that he could never act in an unworthy way even if you don't understand things at the moment, even as you're weary under the load. There is a deeper motivating spring of optimism, a motivating stream of confidence that bubbles through in the midst of the darkness that says, "No, God is holy in the midst of this. He is my Rock and my Refuge and I lay hold of the him even under the weight of this present trial." And when you're conscience of your own sin, conscience of the way that you yourself fall short, when you really understand that, you realize that God could righteously give you much greater chastisement than what you're presently enduring, right? What man can offer complaint in light of his sins? The point is that we deserve more judgment and chastisement than God gives us. So in light of that, how could we complain? He could righteously give us more. How can we complain about the lesser things that he does, especially when we walk in the light of his countenance through it all anyway? How could you offer complaint in light of that? You see, when the holiness of God is clear in your mind, that's how you think in response to life. It changes things. A high view of God prevails over your circumstances. And understand again what I'm talking about here is nothing external. I'm not giving you an instruction on how you should go out and counsel other people in their trials. I'm wanting you to think about how you respond because how you respond to trials reveals what you really think about God. So I ask the question again: do you need to repent in light of that?

Thirdly. This is all going to end up someplace very joyful. Thirdly. Look, we've got to do this hard work. We have to do this hard spiritual work if we're going to enjoy the benefits of the Christian life and glorify our Savior in the midst of it. We have to come to grips with it. I said this is painful and it's hard work to think this way, to do this spiritual work in your own soul. It's hard work. It takes effort. Thirdly: does your indifference to sin expose a low view of God? Does your indifference to sin expose a low view of God?

Go back to 1 John here as we come back to the text. 1 John, just after 2 Peter. 1 John 1:6. He had just said in verse 5, "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." No, absolutely none is the idea of that ending phrase there. Now in verse 6, he says in light of the holiness of God, verse 6, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." What he's saying here is that you can reason back from the nature of your life to see what you truly believe about the holiness of God. You can reason back from the way that you live life to understand whether you even know him in the first instance or not because he says, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him," you see, it's not about what you say. That doesn't prove anything. I mean, if you actively deny Christ, of course you're not a Christian, but there are a lot of

people who say they know Christ who really don't. Matthew 7:21-29, Jesus said, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord,' and I'll say, 'Depart from Me. I never knew you.' Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? Why do you do that?" Jesus said. "Why this insult to my character that you would speak things but not follow up with action?"

And that's what John is going back to here in verse 6. It says, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him," we claim to know Christ, we claim to have this common life, "and yet walk in the darkness," speaking of a habitual life, a pattern of sin, of unbroken sin, of indifference to the holiness of God, if that's the way someone's life is, then it's all a lie. It doesn't matter what they say. If someone's life contradicts their lips, listen to their life not to what they say. That is exactly what John teaches us here and it is a rebuke to the decisionistic approach to evangelism that says as long as you raised your hand 30 years ago, you're okay. Well, not if that wasn't followed by a life change because if you were truly saved back then, that would mean that you were born again and you were brought into fellowship with the common life of Christ and of course that's going to result in a radical change of life. Darkness and light cannot coexist together. They can't. Go someplace, get into a completely dark room and turn on a pinprick of a flashlight and the light wins every time. It's the same thing spiritually. Someone who is habitually walking in unbroken sin and unrepentant over it is someone who is not a Christian no matter what they say; no matter how deep they drove the stake into the ground 30 years ago when they were six years old and said, "This is when I accepted Christ." Don't insult the holiness of God with such a blasphemous approach to what his salvation means. John says, look at it, verse 6, he says, "If you walk in the darkness, you lie and do not practice the truth." We lie and do not practice the truth. He says that's just a lie. John is referring here to an habitual pattern of life, referring to someone who claims to be a Christian but has no change in their life. You see, someone who loves the holiness of God resists sin.

Now, let me be clear about what we're talking about here. John here in verse 6 is talking about someone who is not a Christian at all, claiming to be a Christian but their life shows that they're not. His point is, the reason he can say that is that the holiness of God drives out sin. It breaks the dominating power of sin. Christ breaks the dominating power of sin so that we live differently after conversion than we did before. That's his main point here. What I want you to see as a Christian is that there is a corollary, there is a point of application for you as well. You see, a love for the holiness of God in your life means that there is going to be a corresponding hatred of sin. I am already so very encouraged by the conversations and the contact that I'm getting from people saying, "I hate this sin in my life." That is a mark of new birth. That is a mark of the reality of your salvation that you hate sin and resist it and so be encouraged in the midst of that but here's the point: when the holiness of God is clear in your mind, clear in your affections, the motivating factor that you want to move ever and ever closer to, then that means that you are going to be someone who puts sin to death in your life. You are going to resist sin. You are going to repent of sin when it comes into your life, and you are not going to consciously tolerate it in your life. That's what a love for the holiness of God does, it motivates you to turn away from sin.

So in terms of diagnosing where you are at with your love of the holiness of God, the question is this: what about, beloved, what about that area of sin, that particular sin in your life that you tolerate and make excuses for? What about that point of conviction that you never quite get around to dealing with? You see, when you tolerate sin in your life, you are showing that you don't esteem the holiness of God quite as much as you say you do on Sunday morning. You see, this works itself out Monday through Saturday. So someone who truly loves the holiness of God is going to find sin in his or her life to be an intolerable foe, one that must be expelled. That's what a love for holiness does.

You see, a love for holiness changes the way that you pray. A love for God's holiness changes the way you view the trials in your life. A love for God's holiness changes how long you're willing to tolerate sin and you say in response to all of that, you say, "This is convicting. This is not making me very joyful." Don't give up. We've done the hard work here this morning. Conviction leads you to the cure. If you're feeling conviction, that's exactly what needs to happen, that's exactly what should happen, that's exactly what I expect to happen but you go one step further. You see, it's not conviction for the sake of conviction alone, it's not conviction to make you walk out hanging your head in defeated guilt. The point is what do we do when we find ourselves as members of this club of Christians who still fall short of the glory of God? I know you're a member of that club, so am I. We're all charter members if we're Christians. If you're not a Christian, you need to repent in the first instance and come to Christ and beg him to save your soul to begin with. But speaking to you as believers, where do we go from that conviction?

Well, that brings us to the third point. The first point was: joy starts with the holiness of God. The second point was: you may love God's holiness less than you think and we've diagnosed that. We've helped you see where that's probably true in your life. Thirdly, what do we do then? That conviction that comes from self-examination, that conviction should drive you to Christ. It should drive you to Christ. It should make you come back to him in humble repentance, humble appeal to him because an awareness of sin is designed to drive you to Christ.

Look at chapter 1, verse 7. John says, "but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." Skip down to verse 9. I'm actually going to save verse 9 for next time but it needs to be said here. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Now, stay with me here because here is the joy of your life written into the Scriptures in just what we're talking about right here. He says, "if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light," talking about that habitual pattern of life; a habitual pattern of life that is oriented around the holiness of God, that loves God for his intrinsic person and lives in response to and in submission to his word. It is not talking about spiritual perfection. There is no such thing as spiritual perfection in this life. If there was, the Apostle Paul would have attained to it. But he said in Philippians 3, "I haven't attained to it," and none of us are better than the Apostle Paul and so we are all falling short here.

So what do you do with it? What is he saying when he says walking in the light? He's saying Christians don't tolerate sin in their lives. They know God is holy so they pursue holiness as their life goal even though they fall short sometimes, even though we are not all that we should be. True conversion, his point is that – oh, let's read this slowly – true conversion, true salvation results in a life that is lived in light of God's word without deceit or consciously tolerated sin. That's what it means to walk in the light. It means, "I see Christ as my only righteousness. I see his shed blood as the only ground for the forgiveness of the sins of my soul. I love him. I embrace him. I receive him. I rest in him. Only he can save me. The works of my hands cannot save my soul. The works of my hands cannot atone for a single sin let alone the countless since that I have committed and have yet to commit while I still breathe." True conversion embraces Christ, it embraces God's word, and it results in a life change that loves God's holiness and as a corollary says, "Sin may still crop up in my life but I don't accept it. I resist it. I do not tolerate it. I repent of it when it comes to mind."

Now, for someone like that, here's the joy in this. Okay, we've gone a long route to get to the joy in this. Look at that, verse 7, look at what it means to be a Christian. Verse 7, "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." Verse 9, "He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Listen, this better be precious to you. This should be precious to you. As you become so conscious of indwelling sin and how you fall short and you realize that you don't love the holiness of God like you thought you did, God brings you to that point so that you would come to this next point and you would flee to Christ and say, "Lord Jesus, I ask you to cleanse me and forgive me from my very imperfect devotion to this holy God." And the work of Christ on the cross is your guarantee that full pardon meets that prayer of confession. God forgives your sins. God cleanses you. Psalm 103:12 says, "As far as the east is from the west, So far have I removed their transgressions from them." In Hebrews it says, Hebrews 10, "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." The holiness of God drives you to realize, "I am so sinful," and that conviction of saying, "I am so sinful," drives you back to the foot of the cross where you are met by a merciful Savior who has paid the price of all of your sins and says, "I have taken that guilt and borne it in my own flesh. God has punished me for what you have done. You are now free to go." Free from guilt. The conviction of guilt is met by and satisfied by the shed blood of Christ.

Look at verse 7 with me again, look at the end of verse 7 with me. Here is joy, "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." Don't miss that little word "all." The thing that you most regret and feel the most guilt about in your past, and for some of you I'm quite sure that it's pretty graphic, is covered by that cleansing blood of Christ. All sin. No sin in your life is beyond the cleansing power of Christ's blood. You stand before God not on the merits of your own love for holiness but on the righteousness of Christ, the shed blood of Christ, and that is where your hope and your rest lie. All of this brings you back to the person of Christ crucified and risen again for the salvation of your soul, and in Christ you have an all-sufficient Savior. And when you realize that, you are overwhelmed with joy, overwhelmed with gratitude, because the work that is necessary to accomplish your salvation has already been done and the God who orchestrated the crucifixion of

Christ has accepted that payment and when you consciously are resting in the work of the cross, loving his holiness, trusting him for your forgiveness, the doors of joy have been opened wide to you and there is your joy. So while the conviction you feel is great and necessary, we should love God's holiness more than we do. As we feel the conviction of that, we come back to Christ and humble ourselves and confess it and he cleanses us and then enables us and motivates us to grow in that love and we come back to this day by day by day.

Beloved, beloved, Jesus Christ is the friend of sinners. He has washed away the sins of countless numbers of people throughout the generations of ages of history and his blood can cleanse you from the guilt and shame that you yourself feel. And when we are brought to that recognition, then the holiness of God is on full display in the affections of your heart. Christ is at the center of your affections. Sin doesn't look so appealing anymore. Holiness looks a whole lot better than it did before and you want to rise and go and follow and seek it. That is what this passage teaches us, how we respond to the holiness of God and how it is that the holiness of God promotes our joy. It teaches us to root our affections in eternal realities that are built on, that undergird the reality of our salvation, and in that we go forth and walk in a life of joy. Circumstances cannot enter into that holy veil where the redeemed soul rests in Christ. That's where we need to be.

Let's pray.

Our Father, we want to honor you. We confess that our lives so often fall short that even the best things that we have to say, the best things that we do, our best affections are still tainted by sin. But Father, we look at your word and we look to Christ and we realize that you have accounted for that. Father, we grieve over the reality that we don't love you as much as we should but we rejoice and our grief is swallowed up in the joy that comes from realizing that our Savior has intervened on our behalf, and that in Christ we have a perfect salvation. We love you. We honor you and we seek by your grace alone to walk in a greater holiness that is better worthy of your holy name. Thank you for these wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ. Father, may you sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. For those who do not know Christ, O God, may the realities that we have spoken about here today be that which your Spirit uses to awaken them and to woo them to a saving faith in Christ. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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