

Authentic Christianity #3

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You had church today. I want to encourage you this morning, hopefully you have a Bible with you. I want to encourage you to turn to two very specific places. In the New Testament, the book of 1 John 2 and in the Old Testament, the book of Zechariah 3. Now, I know that's going to be easy to find because most of you do your quiet time in the minor prophets, in particular Zechariah, so you know where that is. Zechariah is actually the second to the last book of your Old Testament, chapter 3, but we're going to spend most of our time in 1 John 2:1-2.

If you're a first time guest or visitor with us today, we're on a journey through the book of 1 John or maybe you haven't been with us in a while and you're back because of the seasons of life and such, we are studying through this book of the Bible, a topic and idea known as authentic Christianity. In our world today, there are so many ideas, so many philosophies, so many concepts, so many opinions on what either a Christian should or should not be. I think it's just advantageous that we go to the book of 1 John and see what is this Christianity and what's it supposed to look like, how is it supposed to act, how is it supposed to behave. Now you may be thinking to yourself these are unique days. Never before have there been so many different ideas and opinions and such, but believe it or not 2,000 years ago in the first century, the early Christians were having the same issues, they were having the same struggles because everybody had a different idea of what the followers of this Jesus should look like and behave and so they struggled with capturing authentic Christianity and it only makes sense that we would as well.

Now, up until this point in chapter 1, we've addressed the person of Jesus, that he is timeless, he is tangible; that we as his followers, we're supposed to walk in the light and not in darkness. In the days ahead, we're going to deal with issues such as hypocrisy and brotherly love and spiritual discernment but today, just two very simple yet profound verses, verses 1 and 2 of 1 John 2. I never want to say they're the most important two verses in the book of the Bible but they're very critical to understanding authentic Christianity because it deals with who Jesus not only is but what is it that he has done on our behalf that allows us to be Christians even to begin with. So 1 John 2, two very simple verses. It says,

1 My little children, these things write I unto you, that you sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: 2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

Now, this passage begins with what I want to call a paradox. It appears that you have two statements that are in conflict with each other. He says, "Do not sin but if you do sin," and what the paradox is is there is the requirement of God that appears to be in conflict with the reality of humanity. Allow me to explain. God's standard has always, is and will always be sinlessness. God never rationalizes sin, he never justifies sin, he never excuses sin. In fact, in God's economy, there is no good reason to ever go against what he has commanded or what he has said. In fact, if we go all the way back to the book of Genesis 2, we discover the first scenario where the Lord makes this very evident. We're in the garden of Eden. Sin has not commenced. That's in chapter 3. And there is Adam and Eve and they're receiving the instructions thereof, and the Lord makes it real simple. It wasn't a difficult assignment. He said, "Here is the tree of life. You may eat of it freely. You can partake morning, noon and night, all day long. Life is going to be good as long as you only eat of this tree. We're in a good relationship not only with each other, you'll be in a good relationship with each other and life is going to go the way you desire it to go. However, in the event that you think, now, God didn't say it this way," so this is the New Revised Jeff Version, "in the event that you think you're smarter than me, there is this other tree called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you decide that that's the better route, you will surely die." And we see the consequences from up until this very day of what occurred in Genesis 3 when we as humanity thought that we were smarter than God and could outwit God and we knew better how to live life when we fell into sin.

But God's requirement has not changed. He never excused it. He never justified. He never came to Adam and Eve and said, "Well, in that case, I guess I could understand." No. There is none of that taking place and so his requirement is sinlessness but reality is that we are sin ravaged people. In fact, one of the most famous sermons that Jesus ever preached is called the Sermon on the Mount. It's found in Matthew 5 through chapter 7, and we know it as, "Blessed are these and blessed are those," and a lot of times people elevate this passage of Scripture as just one of the most fabulous pieces on "Christianity." However if you take a step back from the Sermon on the Mount, it doesn't so much tell us what we should be as it exposes us for who we are. It says, "Well, if you're impressed with yourself because you've never done this, have you ever thought this? Oh, you've never participated in this activity but have you ever made this statement?" You see, by the time you get to the end of that passage where Jesus says, "You can either build your life on the rock," which is him, "or on anything else which is shifting sand," he has basically peeled away the curtains and revealed very clearly that no matter what we may look like on the outside, all of us have a sin problem on the inside. Now, many of you know, I'm from the state of Texas, that's where I originally came from and back there they call it perfuming the pig. You can make it smell as good as you want it to but down deep it's still a pig, and we oftentimes have these ways of covering and glossing over on the outside when the reality is we're depraved on the inside.

Now, there are those who would come to me and they say, "But Jeff, I believe that humanity at its heart, humanity is good. Humanity is altruistic. Humanity is benevolent. Humanity has good intentions." I would argue that point. In fact, I would claim humanity is not good, humanity is depraved. You see, 1 Corinthians 15 says, "But because of Adam," that's Genesis 2 and 3 and that situation, "sin and death has entered the world." When left to his own devices, humanity always gravitates toward rebellion against God, not in the worship thereof. And I know there are good arguments and I know people can get in debates whether they be formal or informal, but let me give you some real life illustrations.

I, as many of you, have had the experience in life of parenting. All of us have been the children of parents at some level in some stage of our days. And when you're parenting, you know, there is this idea as you're expecting children or you know that children are going to be coming into your family whether being birthed or adopted, you think that your children are going to be different than everybody else's. You do. You think, "Oh, I've seen how other kids act but mine aren't going to act that way." And so what happens is and I'll give you kind of a summary statement for those of you who are kind of a little bit behind me as far as this stage of raising children, when the first child comes, if there is an item that is to be in their mouth or to take care of if it ever falls on the floor, you pick it up, you wash it, you sanitize it, you sanitize it again and then you pray about putting it back in their mouth, right? When the second child comes, you pick it up, you wash it, you don't bother praying, you put it back in their mouth. When the third child comes, you just pick it up and stick it right back in their mouth. You don't worry about it.

The reason I give that illustration is because when we were expecting our first child, Tracy and I are good folks and not only did we pray through all the pregnancy but even in those infant days, I mean, consistently praying over. I was under the misconception that my child's first words were going to be, "Yes, sir. What would you like for me to do for you today? What do you want? What do you need?" Do you know what my child's first words were? No! Mine! You see, we come out saying no, not yes. We come out selfish, not selfless. That's human depraved nature.

Now, there may be some of you saying, "I'm not convinced. I do believe that humanity is good. Down deep we're really not the sinful creatures that you're making us out to be." I have an assignment for you. It'll take about 30 minutes. It's real easy. Next Sunday, I want you to volunteer in the nursery and I promise you by the time your hour of volunteering is over, you will be in agreement with me that humanity is sinful because they're going to argue over toys that don't even matter. They're going to grab stuff that's not even their's just because they can.

Humanity is depraved and so when it says here, "Do not sin but if you sin," understand there's a paradox happening. God's standard is sinlessness but our reality is a sinfulness, which is why the rest of this passage is so critical because it says, "Do not sin but if you sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who is the propitiation for our sins and not only for ours, but for the sins of the whole world." Now, there are two concepts, two words there that I want to kind of unpack for us this morning.

The first one is this idea of an advocate. It says that we have an advocate which literally means someone who speaks on our behalf; someone who is the go-between; somebody who in our terminology today is our defense attorney. Somebody who says, "No matter what you've said or done about or to them, I will stand up and defend them." It says that Jesus is our advocate but unlike an earthly illustration of a courtroom scene or even a casual conflict of interest, when it says that Jesus is our advocate, we have to understand it in light of Ephesians 6. You see, Ephesians 6 says we don't fight against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and rulers of darkness. In fact it says, we wrestle against the wiles of the devil and he shoots darts at us. So when it says that he is our advocate, it's not just simply standing up for us but allowing the darts of the enemy to strike him and not us.

So when we go to the book of Zechariah in the Old Testament, we have a beautiful illustration of what this means. Now, when you turn to Zechariah 3, there are going to be three principle characters that are involved in this story. We have a man by the name of Joshua. He is the high priest. He is the human involved in this story. There is a character known as Satan. Now, we knew him originally as Lucifer. He was the lighted one. According to Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, he was perfect in all of his ways; his tabrets were beautiful; his praise was constantly magnifying and glorifying the Lord. But sin was found within him and he fell and when he fell, the Bible describes him as that old serpent; it describes him as that old dragon; it describes him as the devil; and it also describes him, as we're going to see in a moment, as Satan. The adversary. The accuser in our life.

Joshua, Satan and the angel of the Lord. Now, this is an interesting character. When we see this individual show up, the angel of the Lord, there is all kinds of speculation and ideas, however we're going to see him do something that no human or even angelic character can do, he's actually going to forgive Joshua and absolve him of his sins. Now that's a task that only is reserved for God. Many have suggested that in this passage and others, we are experiencing what is called a Christophany. Now that's a good Scrabble word for those of you that play that, it'll get you a lot of points, and Christophany means the manifestation of the appearance of Jesus Christ prior to his physical incarnation. Remember the first verse of 1 John? "That which was from the beginning." He's always been and so there are events like many would suggest in Genesis 14, this guy by the name of Melchizedek or the Captain of the Lord's Host and other scenarios, even when Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego were in the famous furnace of fire, that one that appeared as the Son of God that even Nebuchadnezzar could recognize, possibly a Christophany.

With that being said, I want you to notice what occurs in Zechariah 3. It says in verse 1, "And he shewed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan," the accuser, "standing at his right hand to resist him. And the LORD said unto Satan, The LORD rebuke you, O Satan; even the LORD that has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" Do you notice who is it that comes to Joshua's defense? Joshua doesn't say, "Oh, get away from me." No, it says the Lord rebukes him. We see a perfect picture of the advocacy of Jesus Christ. When it says in 1 John 2 that he is our advocate, he is the one that quenches the fiery darts of the

enemy. When Satan comes and accuses us, he is the one that speaks up and stands between us.

Now let me make this real practical in our lives. I want to peel away the physical world for a moment. Every one of us has sinned. The Bible has made it very clear. We have fallen into temptation. We have come short of expectations. We've messed up. How many times at least in your mind have you heard these words coming from the enemy, pointed at the face of God, "God, you shouldn't love him after what he just did. You shouldn't care about her after what she just participated in. No person who claims to be your child would ever do what they just did." Do you hear the accusations coming from the enemy, pointing the finger at God and saying, "You shouldn't love them. You shouldn't extend your hand of grace. You shouldn't be merciful to them. Can you believe they just did what they did? Can you believe they're thinking what they're thinking?" He accuses us, does he not? He fires those darts. What does it say here? He's our advocate and what we see in Zechariah 3, the picture is that he literally stands up and he rebukes the enemy on our behalf.

You see, there's a paradox. God's standard is sinlessness, we have fallen into sinfulness, but when that sin occurs, it states he desires to be our advocate. He desires to be the one who speaks up for and on our behalf. But there's a second word. Now, this word, if you play Scrabble, this is one of the big ones: propitiation. I don't even know if that will fit on the Scrabble board, but nonetheless it's one of those big fancy theological words. I don't know if time will ever allow me to, in fact, there is kind of a joke in our family when things slow down and things never slow down in our family, there are probably 25-30 different books that one day I would love to write and one of them is on all the "tions" of the Bible, t-i-o-n. For example, regeneration, sanctification, imputation, justification, glorification. All of those words are just rich in meaning of our relationship with and to the Lord.

For example, regeneration. It means to be born again. To take something that was dead and it's made alive. Sanctification, to become holy or more God-like rather than world-like. Imputation, the charging of something to one's account. Justification, being declared innocent or free. Glorification, we sang about it today. "When we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun, We've no less days to sing God's praise, then when we first begun. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, who is, who is to come." We celebrated today one day there's a glorification coming. Glorification comes because of justification which comes because of regeneration and I say all that to say this: if it were not for propitiation, none of those would count. In fact, all of those great ideas and terminologies, they all rest all of their weight on propitiation. Why? Because that word literally means "for one to bear the consequences thereof or to pay the price." You see, if somebody hasn't paid the price for our sin, there is no regeneration. If someone has not paid the consequences of our sin, there can be no justification or glorification. Somebody's got to pay the price. God's standard is sinlessness, our reality is sinfulness. He wants to advocate for us but the question is: who has paid the price?

Now, some years ago, there was a movie that came out, in fact it was about 12 years ago. It's kind of one of those action thriller historical fiction movies entitled "National Treasure." Now, I'm going to go ahead and warn you, I'm going to spoil the plot of this movie if you've never seen it but it's been out for 12 years so shame on you, you should have already watched it by now. But "National Treasure" is this action movie about a family by the last name of Gates. They feel like they have been entrusted since the founding of this country, this is the movie plot, that there is a great treasure of such immense value that no one sovereign state or entity should be allowed to hoard it or to have complete control of, and so for hundreds of years there have been clues and ideas that have been supposedly passed on to the discovery of this "national treasure."

Well, the movie picks up with this final individual by the name of Gates, carrying on the family name. He's obsessed with discovering. He's obsessed with finance. He's not only driving his friends, he's driving his family crazy in the process and he discovers or he decides that it's time to put the plan into full motion. If you've seen the movie, there are all kinds of antics and wild ideas. In fact, at one point he even steals the Constitution of the United States because he believes there is a hidden treasure map on the back. Though he does it in a very genteel and nice way, he kidnaps a government employee. I mean, there's all kinds of things that are happening here. By the end of the movie, they named it "National Treasure" because why? Well, they find the treasure. That's the plot that I just ruined but you should have seen it anyway.

They find the treasure and there's this conversation that takes place between Gates and a law enforcement official. They are seated on the steps of an old church there in the New England area and story's below them is the great discovery to which in this conversation they are beginning to plan what are the days ahead going to look like. To which the law enforcement officer turns to Gates, the one who discovered this great treasure and says, "You have two options. You can either A. return the Constitution and go to jail for a very long time, or B. go to jail for a very long time. You choose." To which he responds, "I would really love not to go to prison." To which this law enforcement officer responding to his question makes a profound theological statement that relates to propitiation. He says, "Somebody has got to go to jail." In other words, somebody has to pay the price. Somebody has to bear the consequences of our sin.

You see, in these very simple verses, we discover that even though God's standard is sinlessness, we've got a sin problem and the wages of sin according to Romans 6:23 is death. He is our advocate but he's also our propitiation and the question is: who has been doing the propitiating? Is it Jesus or is it us? You see, therein lies two problems that I want to address today because it says he is the propitiation for our sins but not ours only but for the sins of the whole world because there are some people today that are listening to me saying, "That's great for you but I've got my own standard." Or, "I understand where you're coming from, pastor, and that's great but I know some other folks and they see things a little differently." Well, what I've discovered in life in thousands of conversations is I think there are two ways that humanity or two problems that humanity naturally defaults into to dismiss this need for propitiation in our life.

The first one is this: self-sufficiency; thinking somehow some way we've got it under control. We're somehow good enough. We've been generous enough. If we were to get the balances of our life out, the good would outweigh the bad. Our benevolence, our giving somehow some way, if you take all of the pieces, it's going to be okay. You know this is what humanity did in Genesis 3, right? Adam and Eve fall into sin. What's the first thing they do? They grab a fig leaf. They knew they were naked. They knew they were exposed before God. They tried to sufficiently cover their sin and it didn't work.

But my favorite story in the Old Testament regarding self-sufficiency comes from the life of Samson. Do y'all remember Samson? Samson was the strongest man, not just in the area, but in the world. The Bible says that he had a Nazarite vow. He was not to eat anything of a dead animal; he was not to consume any amount of alcohol; and he was never to cut his hair. Imagine an individual in the community with seven foot long dreadlocks dragging behind them everywhere they go. This is Samson. That was his strength. In fact, we find out later when he compromises with Delilah, his strength was gone when his hair was cut. But early in his life, we discover that he has one purpose, to protect the Israelites from the Philistines. The Philistines want to eradicate the Israelites so the Lord has put a call on Samson's life that when the Philistines come to defeat them, that he is to defeat the Philistines.

One day, the Philistines, they think that they have Samson cornered. There are 1,000 of them and one of Samson and they caught him offguard. He does not have a weapon in his hand, he has only the ability to pick up the jawbone of a donkey. That's it. So 1,000 against 1. First guy goes out, Samson, thump, I mean, he just thumps him. He's gone. Second guy, thumps him. Pretty soon you've got 500 dead guys laying on the battlefield. If it were a football game, they'd take either a time-out or they'd huddle up, "We need a new game plan, right? 500 are dead. He's only got the jawbone of a donkey. Let's rework this game plan." Fast forward, 999 dead guys. I am convinced the thousandth guy, he was from the South. He had to be from the South because he said, "Don't worry. I got this. You ain't seen nothing yet, Samson. I've got ya." 999 dead guys and he still says, "I can do this."

What a picture of humanity's self-sufficiency. We have thousands of years of recorded human history, we have 66 books in your Bible that show us from Genesis all the way to Revelation, no matter how hard we try or how well and good our intentions are, they all fall short. But it's not just self-sufficiency, it's self-defense. How quickly we are to make statements such as this, "But God, if you were in my situation, you would have done the exact same thing." To which the Lord responds, 1 Corinthians 10:13, "There is no temptation that has come to man that has not come into all of which he will give us an out." Or how many times have you said, "But God, if you were me, in fact, if you had been in this situation in the 21st century, you'd have done what I did." Oh no, no, Hebrews 4:15, it says that Jesus endured every temptation known to man. But how quick we are to come to our own defense and say, "Well, in my situation, my circumstance, it's justified. I don't need propitiation, I don't need somebody to pay the price. This one's okay."

You know, at the end of your Bible in the book of Revelation 20, we have an event that many people have called the Great White Throne Judgment. Why? Because it says, "There stood a great white throne and Jesus sat upon thereon." It's a fulfillment of 2 Peter 3 that says the heavens and the earth will be engulfed in fire and eternity as we know it begins. It says that there were the dead, great and small, free and bond, any and all. And it says that when the dead small and great stand before the Lord, it says the books were opened. One was the book of life and it says those that were written therein and, by the way, we find the book of life mentioned early on in the Bible, the book of Exodus. It says that those that were mentioned therein, life everlasting, but those whose names were not found written in the book of life, the book of works was opened up and the idea, the picture that we get there is that all of those who have trusted in themselves, all of those who have rejected the need for Jesus in their life, have said, "I've got this," that their works are compared. Their behavior is analyzed.

I cannot tell you how many people I've engaged in a one-on-one conversation with and they'll make statements to me such as this, "Well, one day when I see God face-to-face, I'm gonna give him a piece of my mind." Okay, good luck with that one. Or people will say, "Well, when I see God face-to-face, I'm gonna let him know what really happened." I've got news for you, the Bible says the Lord knows how many or how few hairs are on your head, I think he knows what happened and I think he knows the situation. You know, the Bible says in Hebrews 9:27, "All must die and face the judgment." In other words, every one of us one day is going to stand before God, those that are written in the book of life, life everlasting, propitiation, your sins have been paid for. Those who say, "I got this," the book of works.

Here's what I find interesting about that passage. Go home and read it today just for the sake of hopefully making sure that I'm not leading you down a wrong path. There is nobody who says anything in self-defense at that event. Silence because when we stand before a holy God who was gracious enough and merciful enough to send his own Son to give his own life and to shed his own blood for the payment of our sins and we think we're so sufficient that we don't need it, there is no defense.

Let's pray with our heads bowed, our eyes closed, as we come and prepare for our time of invitation. You know, maybe today you're that individual. It doesn't matter if you're here for the first time or you've been in church so many times you've lost count how many times you've attended, but maybe just maybe today, you've realized that you've been trusting in your own endeavors, you've been entrusting in your own intelligence, you've been trusting in your own creativity to somehow take care of your sin problem and maybe today the Lord has made it real clear that only Jesus could take care of it, you may be wondering, "What do I need to do? How do I take care of things?" I've got great news for you. It doesn't matter where you've been, what you've done, who you've been with, the Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

If you're that individual today, let me encourage you, just have a conversation with God. I know we call it prayer technically but you don't have to say anything out loud. You don't have to say the exact same words I say but maybe your conversation would go a little

something like this. "God, I realize today that I'm the problem and that Jesus is the answer. I understand that I have a sin problem that only the blood of Jesus can cure. God, you know how I've tried to address this issue in the past. You know the image that I've put in front of others but you see deep down into the core of my heart and because of that, I want you to know what you already know from my lips, I've sinned. I've messed up. I'm the problem. In the best way I know how, I want to ask you, forgive me. Save me and give me a new life in Jesus Christ. God, I come today and I don't know a whole lot but I do know that Jesus is the only solution to my sin problem."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe today that's the decision you made and you need to come forward in a moment after I pray. Maybe that's a decision you've made years ago and you need to follow in believer's baptism. Or maybe you're like the many others who have come in our other services today, this is the church God has called you to plug into and you want to just be a part of a thriving, exciting, Jesus-loving, mission-minded church. Whatever the decision would be, after I pray, you come.

Lord, how great it is to know that you're still moving and working in our lives. You have not put us on the shelf. You have not put us to the outskirts but as your word says, your eyes are moving to and fro looking for those who would love you. Lord, I pray today whatever it is that you have purposed in our heart, we would have the privilege of celebrating it at our invitation. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Church, I'm going to ask you to stand with me as Brian leads us, whatever decision, you come.