

SIN AND FORGIVENESS

Courtney had taken her lunch early. She was avoiding a group of her coworkers who called themselves the “news crew.” And by “news,” they meant gossip. Initially, Courtney felt bad about “listening in,” but told herself that it was necessary to navigate the political waters of her job. However, some of the “news” dealt with personal issues of her coworkers. Courtney couldn’t help herself from “sharing the news” with others.

Over the Christmas break, Courtney spent more time with God. She felt more and more convicted of her behavior. She cried as she prayed, “Forgive me, God. Help me, Lord, to reflect You. Help me to be a light to others and not a stumbling block.”

Courtney raised her head from her devotional when she heard her name being called out across the room. The “crew” were arranging themselves around the large table. “Aren’t you eating with us, today?” asked one of her coworkers.

“I’m studying,” Courtney said, as she raised her devotional. Courtney knew that eventually she would express her reasons for not sharing in the bulletins. She also realized that it would cost her standing among her friends. But she didn’t care.

“I want to be pleasing to you, Lord, in all that I do,” she said in her heart. It was her New Year’s resolution. “Help me, Lord, today, to live a life you would be proud of.”

1 When is a time that you have been tempted to see a person as too far gone or beyond the reach of God?

2 How could obeying God’s commandments show that we know God?

3 What does it mean to live like Jesus?

⁵ This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

Dealing with Darkness

First John is called a letter, but it is more like a sermon, one written by a wise leader who wants to guide a younger group of followers in the faith. The lofty prologue builds up to John's thesis statement in verse 5: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." As readers come to learn, the reason that John writes in this way is not because people are thinking of God as a source of darkness. Rather, they might be tempted to think that their own darkness—a metaphor for sin—can just remain hidden. The point is, drawing near to God is going to require that we honestly confront our weaknesses.

John speaks of a group who has already left the community of faith (2:19), and it is possible that he is trying to correct the faulty thinking and behaviors that led to schism. Three times, the verses condemn an attitude that minimizes the significance of sin. First, the preacher says that it is fruitless to ignore sin—pretending that sin isn't there, even if we are otherwise claiming to follow God (1:6). Likewise, coming right out and denying our sin makes the problem

worse, turning us into liars (1:8). Worse yet is a false sense of superiority by saying “we have not sinned,” which makes it seem like the Spirit’s conviction isn’t real (1:10). We best not pretend that it is *God* who is the liar, or else “his word is not in us.” Hypocrisy, denial, and self-deception are poisonous to our relationships with one another and to our walk with God.

John alternates these three condemnations with recommendations for following the truth of the gospel, what he calls “the message” (v. 5). Instead of denying sin’s seriousness by continuing to “walk in the darkness” (v. 6), we should “walk in the light, as he is in the light” (v. 7). Instead of denying our guilt (v. 8), we ought to confess our sins (v. 9). Instead of pounding our chests in confidence, we would do better to freely admit our wrongs, rather than compound them with denial.

John commends an attitude that freely confesses sin because God—in whom there is no darkness—has freely given His Son, Jesus, to remove and purify the darkness; Jesus’ blood purifies from sin (v. 7). At the same time that we become reconciled with God, we have the joy of “fellowship with one another,” as brothers and sisters who have all walked the same path. Instead of hiding ourselves and allowing darkness to drive us apart, we can be drawn to the light.

1 Why does John sum up the gospel message as “God is light” (v. 5)?

2 What attitudes toward sin does John condemn? Why?



In the Greco-Roman world, houses were constructed with few windows, and often the only source of light would be a small oil lamp. John’s readers would know all about the dangers of walking in darkness (1 John 1:6).

Diogo de Sousa Museum/Joseolgon

¹ My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye 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.

³ And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

⁴ He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. ⁵ But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. ⁶ He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.

¹ My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

³ We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. ⁴ Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. ⁵ But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: ⁶ Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

Living in Light

Lest his readers confuse an emphasis on confession and forgiveness of sin with an attitude of tolerance for sin, John affectionately explains to his “dear children” that, “I write this . . . so that you will not sin” (v. 1). Even though God regards sin as forgivable, believers should still regard sin as intolerable in themselves. Better to avoid sin in the first place!

Part and parcel of what it means for Jesus to be “the light of the world” (John 8:12) is that “he is the atoning sacrifice . . . for the sins of the world” (1 John 2:2), as well as an “advocate” (v. 1). Darkness can be brought into Christ’s light because He *is* light, which both exposes and expels the dark.

If John writes “so that you will not sin,” his words should not come as a surprise: “keep his [God’s] commands” (vv. 1, 3). John isn’t debating whether we know what God expects; he assumes that, by and large, we know the difference between right and wrong. Our failures don’t usually come from lack of knowledge but from lack of execution.

For John, keeping God's commands is the real test whether we do, in fact, "know him [God]." For the one who claims to know God, but lacks the desire to keep His commands, John gives the same condemnation as before: that one "is a liar, and the truth is not in that person" (v. 4).

But for the person who claims to know God and "obeys his word" (v. 5)—John does not say that this person has the truth in them (though that is certainly implied). John goes further: in that person, "love for God is truly made complete" (v. 5). For John, Jesus' *commands* can be summed up in one *command* (singular): "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another" (1 John 3:23). Love for one another displays and fulfills our love for God. God's intention is for His love to overflow: first from God to the world, and then from the believer to other Christians.

When John recalls those who departed from the community in 1 John 2:19, he thinks of them as cutting short the chain of God's love. John isn't getting into who was right or wrong. When God's love does not have its full effect, it reveals insincerity of motives: "whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8).

The question is, how can anyone live up to the standard of God's love? John points to Jesus, and he makes Christ's example the goal. Those who wish to "[abide] in" God "ought . . . to walk, even as [Jesus] walked" (v. 6 KJV). John knows this includes serving others, considering their physical needs, and remembering their need for spiritual reconciliation.

1 Do you consider it easy or difficult to "keep [God's] commands" (v. 3)? Why?

2 What kinds of commands does John have in mind?

3 How do you think that love for one another might "complete" the love for God?

Love's Completion

“You complete me” is a popular phrase for people in love, but what does it mean? We complete a project, complete the renovations on a house, or complete a term of service. How does a person complete love?

John speaks of our desire to be with God, what he calls abiding in Him (1 John 2:6). We might want the joys of relationship, while neglecting what the relationship requires. We might want to be in community, until that sense of community threatens our cherished independence.

But when Jesus speaks to His followers in John's Gospel, He compares remaining with God to staying attached to a vine: “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Staying connected to the source of light and love is what sustains our ability to be generous to others, to follow Jesus' example of sacrificial love.

The closest I've seen to love's completion was in the relationship of my grandparents. When they were married in 1950, they were young and starry-eyed. But after many decades of shared experience, their relationship was grounded in trust. My grandfather would say with a grin, “Next month is our anniversary. I just asked, and she agreed to one more year before she leaves me.” He could joke to his heart's content, but it was obvious that nothing could come between them. They had lived a wise and frugal life and could be wildly generous to individuals in their church and neighborhood.

To speak of love's completion is to point to what love for God leads us to do. It leads us in patterns of faithfulness, and it leads to sincere joy. Jesus says, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

1 What does it look like for a community to “walk in the light, as he is in the light” (1 John 1:7)?

2 What do the relationships we share with one another signal about our connection to God?

3 Where have you seen joy emerge when relationships are secure and when God is at the center?

Loving Mindfully

The text of 1 John is filled with actionable statements that are easy to memorize. Repeating and setting our minds on simple passages of Scripture can be an encouraging way to face the world and to remain connected to God.

Choose one phrase to memorize for the week ahead. Consider writing it at the top of a journal page, and use the words to guide your prayer.

“Walk in the light, as he is in the light” (1:7)

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins” (1:9)

“If anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them” (2:5)

Key Text

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

—1 John 1:8–9 KJV

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

—1 John 1:8–9 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of January 5 through January 10

- Mon.** Ezekiel 18:20–23, 27–32—Turn Away from Sin.
- Tue.** Isaiah 1:10–21—Turn Toward Righteousness.
- Wed.** Mark 2:1–12—Jesus Has Power to Forgive Sins.
- Thu.** Hebrews 11:1–10—Draw Near to God by Faith.
- Fri.** 2 Chronicles 7:12–16—Repent and Seek God’s Face.
- Sat.** Acts 2:32–39—Repent and Be Baptized.

Next Week: Luke 15:11–24; Acts 2:38–39

Have you lost anything recently? If so, notice your emotions when you are searching and how they change if that item is later found.