

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 1 John 1:1-2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 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. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Today, with the events of Good Friday and Easter still fresh on our hearts, it seems fitting that we turn to this text from 1 John and ask ourselves, where do we go from here? The fulfillment of God's Easter plan has not erased the reality that we still do battle with questions and doubts—at least occasionally in our lives; it has not removed all pain from our lives, and it hasn't eliminated the struggles we face with temptation and sin. We undeniably continue dealing with inward spiritual battles as we are attacked daily by evil lies which admittedly, can be disguised in a manner that looks pretty appealing. John's message has something to say about all of this.

But, before digging into the actual text, it is important that we answer the question of who exactly was this John who wrote this text? You will understand why, in a few moments. John, was one of the disciples who walked and talked with Jesus. He was probably "the disciple whom Jesus loved", according to the gospel of John 21:20, and along with Peter and James, he had a special relationship with Jesus. At the time of this writing, sometime between A.D. 85 and 90, it is believed he was an older man and perhaps the only surviving apostle. It was written before he was exiled to the island of Patmos.

This letter was not written to any one particular church; but to the young Gentile church overall, at least second and third-generation Christians, who were being hassled by false teachers who had entered the church. These false teachers denied the incarnation of Jesus Christ that he was the embodiment of God who died and arose from the grave.

John wrote this letter to give the believers assurance and confidence in God and in their faith from his personal experience and to verify that Jesus was the Messiah, Son of God, the Word of Life, and as he calls him in this text—the incarnation of God himself. Unfortunately, some of the young Christians were losing their commitment to the faith and were conforming to the world's standards which denied Christ.

John lived with Jesus, listened to him teach, saw him perform miracles, watched him die, saw him in living form when he arose from the dead; so, he knew without a shadow of a doubt

that Jesus was exactly who he claimed to be. John wrote this, then, to put the believers back on track, to show the difference between light and darkness, meaning truth and inaccuracy, and to encourage the church to grow in sincere love for God and for one another.

Of course, like these early Gentile believers, we do not have first-hand experience and exposure to Jesus, but we do have the New Testament, which these believers did not have yet, that records everything that we know about Jesus from people who were eyewitnesses to Jesus. Yet, there are many "false teachers" with a variety of ungodly accepted values, competing for our attention, and in some cases, winning the battle. Christians today find themselves fighting the same kind of war with misleading temptations.

In verse five John begins the discussion about light vs. darkness. God is light—meaning that God is good, holy, true, pure, and reliable; and all of those living in the light emanates that same light. The darkness is sin and evil, and those who submit to the darkness generate sin and evil through their lives. God, who is light, John goes on to say, exposes evil and sin and in fact, wipes out darkness from the lives and the fellowship of those who do choose to walk in the Light.

This contradicted what the false teachers were professing in John's day. They said the believers could have fellowship with God and go on living in darkness. In their way of thinking, the phrase "we're only human" was their excuse. They taught that the physical body was evil or worthless and this meant one of two things then about a person's behavior.

The options the false teachers taught was that one either needed to deny bodily desires through rigid discipline; or one could oblige every physical desire because the body was going to be destroyed anyway. I bet you can't guess which teaching was most popular with people; of course, the second one. To this, John said no way. One cannot have it both ways—claiming to be right with God while still living in darkness.

It's no different today. There is social acceptance that we can have everything and do anything we want. Sayings like "If it feels good, it must be right; so, do it" and "As long as you are not hurting anyone else, it doesn't matter what you do," and "You need to look out for number one" are all lies sucking good people into the powers of darkness.

Vulnerable, self-reliant Christians can fall victim to these lies just as easily as anyone can and without thinking about the ramifications of their actions, promote the hypothesis that Christians are a bunch of hypocrites. And in fact, those who have drifted towards these lies are more than that; they are living in darkness. John shares a fervent warning to those who choose to live in darkness—Christ, the light of the world exposes and judges such deceit.

Having just celebrated Easter, we know that all is not lost. Jesus paid the price for our sins. He took on our sin and was the final sacrifice for all our sin, but we still need to confess and repent from our sin. It's not because God doesn't know what we've done, but we need to be reminded of it. We need to acknowledge it and feel and express our regret for the sins we committed and ask for help to make the changes necessary so as not to fail in that way again. Then, just as Christ rose from the grave, we rise to a new life of fellowship with him.

A man named David Slagle from Lawrenceville, Georgia, shared this illustration to make a meaningful connection with this point. He said, "My twenty-one-month-old, who had just learned to say 'Daddy,' had been struggling with asthma and an ear infection for two weeks. He coughed and sneezed continually, and his nose ran like a faucet. Each night when I came home, he ran to meet me at the door, smiling, coughing, nose running, yelling, 'Daddy! Daddy!'"

I was not repulsed by his runny nose or close-range sneezes in the least (he 'slimed' every shirt I own!). I love him deeply and enjoy his love for me. It does remind me, though, that

when I am sick with sin, God loves me deeply and desires that I run to him as a son, crying, 'Abba, Father.'"

When we come to verse eight, John is dealing with another of the false teachers' ideas, another lie that opposes the need for confession and repentance. That lie is that people did not have a natural predisposition toward sin, that they were "without sin" and that they were then incapable of sinning. The false teachers wanted to be considered Christians, but they saw no need to confess and repent. This makes absolutely no sense. Why would anyone feel the desire to be known as a Christian, yet not find the need or any meaning in the death and resurrection of Christ?

I don't know how anyone could deny the potential that people sin. It is a fact that we do. All people are sinners by nature and by practice. The evidence is in how the consequences of our sin offend others, even our own beloved sisters and brothers in Christ and we injure ourselves. Sin severely impairs our fellowship with God and with each other.

Yes, when we give our lives over to God, our sins, all our sins, past and present are forgiven, but that does not mean we will never sin again. We don't receive a once and done stamp of approval, which excuses our sins. Oh, if only it were that easy. The reality is that we will sin, and we will need to continue to confess and repent.

Confession and repentance are necessary for us, not so God will continue to accept us. God always has and always will love us, but it is necessary because our sin builds a wall between us and God that needs to be torn down in order to have true fellowship with God. The wall that our sins build between us and God essentially tells God that we don't need God, that we don't want God involved in every aspect of our lives, that we just want the social graces and admiration awarded to the faithful without any real involvement with God.

John bids us to walk in the Light—the Light known as Jesus, our Savior. The Light reveals to us those behaviors we allow to possess us and take us down unknown paths, breaking our fellowship with God and with our brothers and sisters in Christ, who help us remain faithful on our journey.

We should take heed to John's warning about false teachers. All the false teachings and all the lies that are socially acceptable will only lead us down a dead-end path that drops off into a cesspool of trouble, disillusionment, pain, emptiness, and longing. It's a place—an existence void of the God we long for and need.

Accolades of acceptance from inspired darkness will not keep the lost afloat in all that mire and muck. There's no one to hold onto and pull the forlorn out of the sludge of hopelessness, unless one confesses and repents, giving one clear sight of the Savior's hand so the aimless soul can reach out and grab it.

Father Greg Boyle, founder and director of Homeboy Industries in East Los Angeles, has put together a team of physicians trained to remove the tattoos of ex-gang members. The service is crucial for their success in making it outside the gang.

Gang-related tattoos prevent many former gang members from getting jobs or advancing in work. For, others, the markings put them in serious danger on the streets. There is no fee or community service required to receive the service offered by Homeboy Industries; tattoo removal is strictly a gift. Currently, more than a thousand names are on the waiting list.

The seeming permanence of a gang tattoo fosters the attitude that the gang's claim is also permanent. It is a mark of ownership as much as identity. The emotional consequence is that the tie seems a part of the person that can never be shaken.

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I suspect some of us have felt like this with past sins whose mark we cannot shake off though we have been cleansed by Christ. Perhaps the imagery of tattoo removal can evoke a renewed sense of our blessed assurance. Like former gang members who have had the marks of a former life removed, so our sins are blotted out by the blood of Christ. They are remembered no longer.

The process of tattoo removal is extremely painful. Patients describe the laser procedure as feeling like hot grease has been poured on their skin. Yet the list grows, each name representing a life that longs to be free and is willing to endure the pain to seize freedom.

Freedom from darkness is attainable. It may be a difficult struggle to let go of the lessons false voices have ingrained in us, but Christ makes it possible. Let us choose then, to walk in the Light as Christ is in the light, to be free of the darkness that inhibits our fellowship with God and with each other. Amen.