



Catalog No. 714

1 John 1:5–2:2

Second Message

Gary Vanderet

November 27, 1988

WALKING IN LIGHT

SERIES: LIVING CONFIDENTLY IN THE LIGHT

Have you ever been afraid of the dark? When I was a boy, my older brother tried to convince me that everything in the dark was the same as it was in the light, but I did not believe him because I could never trust him. One of the challenges of being a father has been to reassure my two sons that the dark is nothing to be feared. This is probably why I fell in love with Judith Viorst's book *My Mama Says There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires, Creatures, Demons, Monsters, Fiends, Goblins, or Things*. Listen to this excerpt:

My mama says there isn't any mean-eyed monster with long slimy hair and pointy claws going scritch-scratch, scritch-scratch-scratch outside my window. But yesterday my mama said I couldn't have some cream cheese on my sandwich, because, she said, there wasn't any more. And then I found the cream cheese under the lettuce in back of the Jello. So, sometimes even mamas make mistakes. My mama says that a vampire isn't flying over my house with his red and black vampire cape and his vampire f-f-f-fangs. But how could I believe her when she said my wiggly tooth would fall out Thursday, and then it stayed till Sunday after lunch.

The absence of physical light in a room can do strange things to a child's mind. The absence of spiritual light in a life can do the same thing. I am convinced that there are many among us whose lives and minds have been affected by darkness. One of the amazing things that happens is that instead of being afraid of the dark we become afraid of the light. I am sure that is where some of you are today. It is my prayer that as a result of our study, you will allow God to help you step out of your darkness and into his light.

John began his letter by stating that one of the purposes for writing this letter is to enable his readers to enter into fellowship, to know the joy of restored relationships. He now proceeds to deduce from the nature of God the conditions under which fellowship with God is possible. In verse 5 of chapter 1, John reveals the nature of God. Then from verse 6 to the second verse of chapter 2, John deduces from that nature the conditions for this fellowship.

John begins by summarizing the apostolic message in one sentence in verse 5.

I. Summarizing the Apostolic Message (1:5)

And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5 NASB)

We learned last week that the essence of Christianity is life in the person of Jesus Christ. In this passage, John sums up the life of Jesus Christ in one sentence: "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." His life is his message. This message was not invented by John; but is what he heard from Jesus. This verse is probably not a direct statement by Jesus but a summarization of his teaching. This was the message of his life, what Jesus came to tell us.

Positively, John says, "God is light." Negatively, he says, "In him, there is no darkness." This echoes John's words in the first chapter of his gospel: "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overpower it." Later in chapter 8, he recorded that Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John also explained, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."

Of all the statements about the essential Being of God, none is more comprehensive than this one. It is God's nature to reveal himself, just as it is the property of light to shine. What he reveals about himself is his perfect purity and unutterable majesty. We are to think of God as a personal being, infinite and transcendent yet desiring to be known because he has revealed himself. Many of the errors of the false teachers of John's days were due to their ignorance of God's self-revelation of being light, a God in whom there was no darkness at all. He has no shadows or secrecy, no special cliques.

Light and darkness are used metaphorically in Scripture in two primary ways. Intellectually, light is seen as truth and darkness as ignorance or error. The psalmist declares, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." Morally, light symbolizes purity and darkness evil. Isaiah declares, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness."

We can see this double use of the symbolism throughout John's gospel. Both he and Jesus himself constantly refer to Jesus as light. Jesus used both of these symbols, the intellectual and the moral, when he healed the man who was born blind. He made the point that the effect of light was not just to make men see, but to enable them to walk. Right conduct, not just clear vision, is the benefit bestowed by light. In Scripture, truth, like light, has a moral content. Men are not just to know the truth, but to do it. Just as they are not only to see the light, but to walk in it.

Having revealed the nature of God, John now deduces the conditions we are to meet if we are to have fellowship with this light.

II. Understanding the Implications of the Message (1:6–2:2)

In these verses, John exposes and contradicts three of the claims of the false teachers. Each claim is introduced with the phrase "if we say" in verses 6, 8 and 10. The symmetry of the verses is evident. First, he introduces the false teaching with "if we say." Then he contradicts it with an unequivocal statement such as "we lie." Finally, he makes a positive, true statement corresponding to the error he has refuted.

There are two major points we can make from these verses. Both result from our understanding that God is light. One states the problem. The other gives the solution. First, we are given the human problem.

A. The Human Problem: We Are Sinners

All three of these errors deal with this critical point. The three errors concern: the fact of sin in our conduct, its origin in our nature, and its consequence in our relationship to God. They are the misconceptions of men who want fellowship with God on easy terms and who have never learned the inseparable relationship of religion and ethics. As a result, these men have an inadequate doctrine of sin and its seriousness.

In each case, John faces the problem of sin and then proceeds to state the solution. He not only denies the erroneous view but indicates the divine remedy which is offered if men will acknowledge their need of it. He also describes the cleansing and forgiveness which God has made possible through the death of Jesus Christ His Son. Christianity is the only religion which, while emphasizing God is light, first insists on taking sin seriously and then offers a satisfactory moral solution to the problem.

As we look at these false claims, you may find that you believe one of them yourself. As you examine the truth John declares, you will find hope for your situation. The first false claim is presented in verses 6-7.

1. False Claim #1: Sin Does Not Break My Fellowship with God

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 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. (1:6-7)

The first false claim is the assertion that we can have fellowship with God while walking, or habitually living, in darkness. Walking in darkness is ignoring the sin in our lives.

Some of the false teachers were guilty of this error in John's day. The early gnostics thought of the body as a mere envelope covering the human spirit, and they maintained that the spirit was impenetrable. In other words, nothing you did with your body could affect your spirit. There are many who still believe this today. John says we ought to be suspicious of those who claim a mystical intimacy with God and yet walk in the darkness of error and sin. Religion without morality is an illusion.

If we make such a claim, John says we are deliberately and knowingly lying. We are not practicing the truth. That is, we not only contradict the truth in our words, we deny it with our inconsistent lives.

Having refuted the error, John gives the solution. Instead of walking in darkness, we can walk in the light. In fact, we are to do this "as He Himself is in the light." God is in the light because he is always true to himself, and his activity is always consistent with his nature. We must walk in the light of his holiness and his truth, without deceit or dishonesty and without consciously tolerating sin in our conduct.

Walking in the light does not mean behaving perfectly. It is not a state of sinlessness. If that were true, we would not need cleansing. Rather, walking in the light involves honesty and sincerity, having nothing to conceal and not trying to hide anything. It is allowing the light of truth to penetrate our lives. It means taking down our defenses and facades and opening up to others, admitting what we are really going through. It is opening up the hidden closets of our lives. Walking in light means we are the same on the inside as we profess on the outside. As James exhorts us, "Confess your sins to

one another so that you may be healed." When we walk in the light, we no longer hide anything or try to defend ourselves before the light of God. We are real.

A few years ago, newspapers carried the tragic story of the murder of eight-year-old Chris Dilullo. The death actually occurred in 1984 when it had been reported that Chris drowned in lake at a country club while hunting for golf balls. His three friends told police that he had slipped in the pond, and they thought he was playing a trick on them. But they were hiding a secret. Almost two years later, the fifteen-year-old who pushed Chris into the water confessed his guilt to a friend.

That two-year period of darkness took an incredible toll on all three of the boys. The paper reported, "Since the drowning, all three witnesses have suffered emotional instability, according to their parents, police, and their own stories. Their distraught parents say the boys are withdrawn and have nightmares. They are no longer friends." Unconfessed sin always destroys fellowship. The paper went on to say that one of the boys "began crying frequently after Chris' death and had to sleep with his mother... Once he cut his head when he ran full speed into a dumpster." The second boy was fired from a job "because he would stay home from work on days when he felt 'angry and disgusted' about telling a lie to protect a friend." The third boy started "hearing voices and seeing visions and barely talked to his parents." He later entered a hospital for emotionally disturbed children.

That is a tragic example of walking in darkness and is especially vivid and heart-wrenching because it involves youngsters who are not as adept as adults in handling their secrets. But the toll is just as severe. Some of you know that same loneliness. You know the energy you expend in covering up your darkness. You know the fear you experience, and the prison you have created.

Yet we can have freedom when those secrets are exposed and when we walk out of the darkness into the light. John says there are two wonderful results of this openness and honesty. The first is fellowship with one another. Immediately, we become approachable, the walls come down and others can identify with us. We are much easier to live with because we are no longer blaming, demanding or criticizing.

The amazing thing is that the opposite of what we expect to happen takes place. Instead of judging us when we confess sin, others love and accept us. Have you ever experienced that in a group? I have, many times! I have been in meetings when someone finally risks being vulnerable. Instantly, the walls come down and there is a new sense of intimacy, acceptance and reality. God created us to have fellowship. It is dependent upon being open and honest with one another.

The second result is the assurance of forgiveness. When we are honest, we begin to experience the sweet relief of the cleansing grace of God that always accompanies walking in the light. Why? Because the blood of Jesus cannot cleanse excuses, only sins.

There is a second false claim found in verses 8-9.

2. False Claim #2: Sin Does Not Exist in My Nature

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1:8-9)

The second claim is worse than the first. It says, “We have no sin.” The first claim conceded the existence of sin but denied it had the effect of excluding the sinner from fellowship with God. Now the very fact of sin is denied. The word “sin” in the singular refers to the inherited principle of sin—our sin nature or self-centeredness. John says that to say we have no sin is to deceive ourselves. Not only do we fail to practice the truth, we are void of it. If we possessed the truth, we would be aware of our sinfulness.

This type of thinking is prominent in our world. It is found in the religious beliefs of Christian Science, Hinduism and Buddhism and is central in non-religious ideas such as the New Age movement. Unfortunately, it is also found in Christians who excuse evil because of physiological, psychological or social reasons. They believe that in order to deal with the problem we simply need to make an adjustment in our thinking. We only need to think more positively.

But the Scriptures have a different viewpoint. In fact, they say the problem started much earlier in our lives. A few years back, I read a report by the Minnesota Crime Commission regarding rising crime rates. They came to a startling conclusion:

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it—his bottle, his mother’s attention, his playmate’s toy, his uncle’s watch. Deny him these once, and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness which would be murderous were he not so helpless. He is dirty, he has no morals, no knowledge, no skills. This means that all children—not just certain children, all children—are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free rein to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal—a thief, a killer, or a rapist.

Those are true words coming from a secular organization! Sin is a serious problem. This is why the ark-builder got drunk, why a leader lost his temper, why a king committed adultery and murder, and why a disciple denied the Lord. As Paul put it in Romans 7, “Though I wish to do good, evil is present within me.” John Stott put it this way in *Involvement: Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society*:

We human beings have both a unique dignity as creatures made in God’s image and a unique depravity as sinners under his judgment. The former gives us hope; the latter places a limit on our expectations. Our Christian critique of the secular mind is that it tends to be either too naively optimistic or too negatively pessimistic in its estimates of the human condition, whereas the Christian mind, firmly rooted in biblical realism, both celebrates the glory and deplors the shame of our human being. We can behave like God in whose image we are made, only to descend to the level of the beasts. We are able to think, choose, create, love, and worship, but also to refuse to think, to choose evil, to destroy, to hate, and to worship ourselves. We build churches and drop bombs. We develop intensive care units for the critically ill and use the same technology to torture political enemies who presume to disagree with us. This is “man”, a strange bewildering paradox, dust of earth and breath of God, shame and glory.

To say that we have no sin is to deceive ourselves. The correct attitude is not to deny sin but to admit it and receive the forgiveness that God has made possible and promises to us. If we confess our sins, acknowledging before God that we are sinners both in nature and practice, God will both “forgive us our sins...and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Sin is a debt that he remits. It is also a stain which he removes. In both, God is said to be faithful and righteous, for God is faithful

to his covenant promises. In Jeremiah 31:34, in promising the new covenant, God said, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” This forgiveness and cleansing, however, are conditional upon our confession.

John refutes the third false claim in verse 10.

3. False Claim #3: Sin is Not Present in My Life

If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. (1:10)

This is the most blatant of the three denials. While conceding in theory that sin does break our fellowship with God and that sin does exist in our disposition, we deny in practice that we have sinned and thus remove ourselves from fellowship with God. The heretics of John’s day maintained that their superior enlightenment rendered them incapable of sinning.

John is as clear here as he is in the other two false claims. To say that we have not sinned is not just telling a deliberate lie as in verse 6 or being deluded as in verse 8. To say this is to actually accuse God of lying. And to reveal that His word is not in us because His word frequently declares that sin is universal, and the word of the gospel, which is a gospel of salvation, clearly assumes the sinfulness of man.

I doubt there are many among us who would have the audacity to claim that they have never sinned, especially among those of us who have lived very long. But having worked with high school students for a number of years I know that sometimes they may have a different attitude. At times they wonder if they are really as bad as the Bible proclaims. Recently, I came across some startling statistics:

1. 65% of all high school students are sexually active. Nearly two out of three students are involved in a sexual relationship.
2. 75% of all students cheat regularly and believe it is okay. Three out of four entering college have already made the value judgment that cheating is not only acceptable, it is the right thing to do to succeed.
3. 30% of all seniors have shoplifted in the last 30 days. One student’s honest revelation was that the fad is to see how much you can take from a store without paying.
4. 45-50% of teenage pregnancies are aborted.
5. 10% of all high school students have experimented with or are living a homosexual lifestyle.

Sin is alive and well, my friends, at any age.

What are we to do in light of such penetrating truth? Do we give up and resign ourselves to the fact that we will always sin? John does not want his readers to think that the frank admission and full forgiveness of our sins allows us to treat sin lightly. It would be possible to misunderstand his statements and think, “If sin is inevitable, why struggle against it?” To counteract this misunderstanding, he begins a new sentence in which the problem of sin in the Christian is dealt with directly.

Instead of adding “if” as in the previous claims, John begins a new sentence in order to enlarge upon the subject of sin in the Christian. Look at the first two verses of chapter 2:

My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. (2:1-2)

There is a wonderful balance expressed in this sentence. It is possible to be too lenient or too severe towards sin. Too much leniency encourages sin by stressing God's provision for the sinner. An exaggerated severity, on the other hand, would deny the possibility of a Christian sinning or refuse forgiveness for failure. We can never escape the command of Jesus to sin no more. However, John says if any man sins God has made restoration possible; he has made provision.

This brings us to the second major point of these verses. Alongside of the human problem is a divine solution.

B. The Divine Solution: There is a Savior

This provision which God has made is unfolded in these verses. It is in the one who is described as "an Advocate with the Father," as "Jesus Christ the righteous," and as "the propitiation for our sins."

Jesus is our Advocate. This word literally means "to come alongside" and describes someone coming alongside to assist another. It was particularly used in the law courts to refer to an attorney who acted as the counsel for the defense, pleading the case of the person on trial. Although the verb is frequently used in the New Testament, the noun is only used by John, here and in the Upper Room Discourse where Jesus labels the Holy Spirit as his Advocate. Just as we have an Advocate in heaven, Christ has an Advocate on earth. The Holy Spirit is Christ's Advocate, pleading his case before a hostile world. As our Advocate in heaven, Christ pleads our case against our accuser (Rev 12:10) before the Father who loves and forgives His children.

This forgiveness is assured through the advocacy of "Jesus Christ, the righteous." This is a composite expression which reveals his human nature (Jesus), his Messianic office (Christ), and his righteous character. In the midst of a sobering passage about the darkness of humanity, Jesus Christ is the exception. There is no shame in Him, only glory. There is no dark side, only light. He knew no sin; he had no sin; he did no sin. He had no sin nature for he was born without sin. Knowing no sin, having no sin and doing no sin, He qualified as the Lamb of God who took away the power of sin and the dread of death.

We have pictured here the righteous Advocate standing before the Father on our behalf. I used to think this was a case of "love pleading with justice," but now I see it differently. It is "justice pleading with love" for our release! Because he is this righteous one, he can be our Advocate.

Notice that our Advocate does not plead our innocence. Instead, he acknowledges our guilt and presents his vicarious sacrifice as the grounds of our acquittal. He is the propitiation for our sins. There needed to be a payment for the sin. His righteous character and sacrificial death paid that debt. As the hymn reminds us: "Amazing love! How can it be,/That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!"

I told you last week that John's desire was to simplify the truth. We have the truth of the gospel boiled down for us in these verses. Let me spell it out for you:

- God's Character: Infinitely Holy (God is light)
- Our Condition: Totally Depraved (We are sinners)
- Our Need: a Substitute
- God's Provision: a Savior

Allow me to be personal. Some of you are walking in darkness. You are ignoring sin in your life, and this is sapping the life out of you. You know loneliness and fear because of your sin. God longs for us to have fellowship with him, to be in a relationship of intimacy and love. The unconfessed sin in your life is preventing you from enjoying that fellowship.

Some of you are living in sexual immorality. Some of you are in homosexual or lesbian relationships. Some of you are regularly cheating on tests. Some of you are cheating regularly on your spouses. Some of you may be involved in incest or in child abuse. Whatever your sin, you are imprisoned.

I want to ask you to take some courageous steps. Step out of the prison of your darkness and walk into the light. You need to make two decisions. First, you must confess your sin before God. Second, you need to confess it to another brother or sister who can pray for you. If you cannot confess your sin to someone else, I wonder if you have truly confessed it to God. If it is easy to confess to God, why is it so difficult to confess to someone else?

I want you to know that God has wonderfully provided a divine solution. I know it is not an easy thing to do. It is a scary thing to reveal your nakedness. We are afraid and ashamed. But God's promise is that we need not be afraid of the light. As we step out of the darkness and confess our sin, we will experience the wonderful joy of fellowship and the sweet relief of His cleansing grace.

© 1988 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino