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1 John 1:5-2:2

Second Message

Andrew Drake

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LIVING IN GOD'S LIGHT

SERIES: WHAT GREAT LOVE!

In the introduction to John's first letter, the apostle highlights the extraordinarily good news about the true nature of Jesus Christ and the purpose of his coming. In Jesus we have eternal and abundant life. The goal of his coming and the purpose of the proclamation of the gospel are to bring about reconciliation and fellowship with God and each other. The result of such fellowship is deep and abiding joy.

Today we will continue to look at John's opening paragraph, where he describes what authentic fellowship with God and each other looks like. Throughout the body of his letter, John focuses on three essential and identifying marks of those who have genuine fellowship with God. They live in God's light, obey God's word, and demonstrate love for one another. John highlights these marks to protect his dear friends from being led astray by false teachers into a counterfeit faith, and to reassure them that their experience of God and fellowship with him are genuine.

The focus of our passage this morning is on the first mark of a true believer: living in God's light. The best way to differentiate between the genuine and the counterfeit is to get to know the real thing first. The children of God will be like God himself. So what is God like?

God is light

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5 TNIV)

The message that John heard from Jesus, and declares emphatically to his readers, is that God is light. Before there was a sun, moon or stars there was light. God said, "Let there be light, and there was light" (Gen 1:3). God is light and he emanates light. Jesus, the Son of God, affirmed this very truth: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Light shines and light reveals. It has many characteristics, but John uses the term for God primarily in contrast to darkness. Darkness is the absence of light. John uses "darkness" not only here in his letter but also in his gospel to refer to evil, sin, wickedness, deception and hate. Light is moral purity, integrity, holiness, truthfulness and love. God who is pure "light" is the antithesis of evil. There is not even a breath or hint of darkness in him. There is no evil in his character, his motive or his plan. He is blameless and without blemish. He is holy and pure, righteous and just.

Having declared the nature of God as light, John goes on to demonstrate that those who claim to have true fellowship with God will be like him. He addresses head-on three claims by the false teachers, exposing that they do not have true fellowship with God. As he does so, he not only exposes their error and contradicts their claim, he forthrightly declares the proper foundation of true fellowship with God.

If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. 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. 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. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. 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. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1:6-2:2)

Let's first take a closer look at these false claims.

Claim #1: We can have fellowship with God and yet walk in the darkness

If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. (1:6)

The term "walk" in the Bible describes a lifestyle. Our walk is the direction and intent of our life. To "walk in darkness" does not describe a person whose heart is for God yet continues to struggle with sin. To walk in darkness means to set your heart and mind, the members of your body, onto the path of disobedience and rebellion to God and his ways.

The apostle Paul put it this way:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires... The sinful mind is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God (Rom 8:5, 7-8).

To walk in darkness is to turn your back on the Lord, who is light, and walk purposefully and habitually in the path of sin. The false teachers claimed that because it is only the spirit and not the body that matters they could pursue a sinful lifestyle

with their bodies without it affecting their fellowship with God.

John attacks that claim directly. Light and darkness are incompatible. To say that we are in communion with God, who is light, yet cling to a life of sin and darkness exposes that we are liars in word and deed. We do not speak the truth and we do not live out the truth.

The apostle warns his readers that there is a big difference between actually having fellowship with God and merely claiming to have fellowship with him. We can say all the right things, but if we pursue sin, then we are hypocrites and out-and-out liars.

John says that there are two paths in life—a path of light and a path of darkness. We cannot claim fellowship with God who is light and at the same time dwell in darkness.

John addresses a second false claim in verse 8.

Claim #2: Fellowship with God is possible because sin does not exist in our nature

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (1:8)

The false teachers' first claim is that sin does not interfere with our relationship with God. This second claim denies sin altogether. This is even more astonishing. The person who makes the first claim says, "Yes, I sin, but it doesn't really matter. It doesn't affect my intimacy with God at all." With this second claim he says, "I don't have any sin. There isn't any sin in my life to worry about."

This claim has a modern ring to it, because in our culture the notion of sin has been pretty much done away with. Sin is regarded as a quaint and outdated term of a bygone era when people were not so enlightened. In so doing, they rationalize many sinful behaviors and make a superficial diagnosis of the human condition. They say our chief problem is not a sinful nature but a bad environment and wayward genetic code.

The truth is that if we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. We are by nature sinful. Jesus said, "the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these defile you. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matt 15:18-19). We are sinful through and through, inside and out.

Sin is a condition of our heart. Our dark nature is not lessened by increased education or age. We cannot blame our sinful behavior on bad parents, an unloving spouse or our biological pre-disposition.

If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, because when the truth is with us we know ourselves to be sinful. Truth is not something abstract, like a moral code. Truth describes God himself. Jesus declared himself to be "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

When Jesus performed a miracle on the Sea of Galilee and Peter came face-to-face with Christ's glory, he fell at the Lord's feet and said, "Depart from me Lord for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). When the glory of God dwells within us we become acutely aware of our own sin. We cannot claim intimate fellowship with God and at the same time assert that we are without sin.

John sets out the third and final claim in verse 10.

Claim #3: Fellowship with God is possible because we have not sinned

If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. (1:10)

The first claim is that sin does not harm our fellowship with God; the second claim is that we are not inherently sinful. This third claim is that we have not sinned at all. These false teachers were claiming fellowship with God, based on the fact that they had not sinned. Their superior knowledge kept them from ever sinning.

Not long ago I received a phone call from a woman who does not attend our church but wanted to be in a home fellowship group. I was eager and confident that I could help her until she told me she did not want to be in a group of sinners. She made it clear that she was for the most part beyond the "sinning" stage of her spiritual journey and wanted to be with other serious and righteous Christians. I mentioned that we have a lot of wonderful groups of both mature and new Christians, but that in each group she would find herself amongst sinners. She was not happy, and she made it very clear that our groups were not for her.

It is unlikely that you and I will ever say that we have never sinned, but in many respects we are all masters at denying and deflecting our sin. We are tempted to redefine our selfishness as "standing up for my rights," or our theft as "perks of the job." We may label our deceit as "little white lies," and our gossip as "prayer requests." We may even be so bold as to characterize our sexual immorality as merely a "lapse in judgment."

John says that anyone who claims he has not sinned makes God out to be a liar and gives evidence that God's word is not in him. The Bible makes it clear that we are sinners by nature and sinners by choice. The apostle Paul put it this way, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

As we consider these three claims we can see that each is a subtle variation on the same theme. These false teachers believed their fellowship with God rested on their divine illumination and sinlessness. Their pride blinded them to their sin and their need for a Savior.

So what does fellowship with God look like? On what foundation are we able to enjoy authentic fellowship with him? John tells us in his response to these false claims.

Fellowship with God is only possible through Jesus Christ his Son

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. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 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. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1:7-2:1-2)

John says that those who genuinely have fellowship with God shun the darkness and enter into his light. "Walking in the light" means living out the presence of God under the power and direction of God. It does not mean living a sinless life. But we must not deceive ourselves. Our actions are often a greater indicator of the nature of our fellowship with the Lord than our pious claims. We are self-deceived if we think we can so easily separate our daily lifestyle from our spiritual maturity. "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord" (Eph 5:8-10).

The purpose of the light is not just to allow us to see, but to illumine a path for us to walk

Years ago when I was a college student, I was traveling in Europe with some friends. We decided to take a guided tour down into the bowels of a dark cavern. We all remained together as we stayed within the light of our guide. Inside the cave our guide turned off his flashlight and it was pitch black. This was not good for me and my claustrophobia issues. I was unable to see my hand in front of my face. I could not determine any kind of depth or direction. I was seriously disoriented. Up, down, left and right were all difficult to determine. In the darkness we were quickly separated and each of us went his own way. Then the guide turned his flashlight back on. Not only could we see one another and re-gather ourselves, we could also see the way out. The light not only allowed us to see but enabled us to walk with our guide and one another. As we live in God's light it brings us into fellowship with others who also live in the light.

John's fatherly love shines through when he addresses his readers "My dear children." He clearly has a great deal of tenderness and affection for them. It is his fervent desire and prayer that this letter will help them in their fight against sin. He does not want them to sin, but he knows they will sin. And when they do he wants them to be assured that God has made a provision for them.

How are people like us, sinful at birth, able to enter into his holy and righteous presence? How are we able to walk in God's light?

John makes it clear our hope for an ongoing fellowship with God is not the result of our divine illumination or our sinless life but the cleansing and forgiveness of our sins through the blood shed by Jesus Christ on the cross. We are welcome in God's presence because he is our advocate and atoning sacrifice.

Our God, who is light, and in whom is no darkness, cannot tolerate sin. None of us is free from sin, therefore the path to fellowship with God can only be opened up through one who is sinless. Not only is Jesus Christ our intercessor before the Father, he is also the very means of our pardon and reconciliation. Jesus stands before God the Father, not to declare our innocence but our guilt, and then steps in to pay the penalty of our sin. Jesus Christ died in our place. Only through a righteous Savior can we be cleansed from all unrighteousness.

We must never view Christ's atoning sacrifice as the act of a loving Son pleading with a reluctant Father to forgive poor sinners. God himself takes the initiative to provide the sacrifice needed for our sins to be forgiven. It was God's love that motivated the sending of his Son to die for us. Both Father and Son willingly and lovingly dealt with the issue of sin on our behalf. Our salvation and cleansing is a gift.

Paul said, "righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith" (Rom 3:21, 23-25).

Jesus' sacrifice was not only for our sins, but the sins of the whole world. As John said in his gospel, Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). Reconciliation, cleansing, forgiveness and fellowship with God can be enjoyed by anyone who embraces him.

This is why John says we must confess our sins. He makes it clear that confession is the first identifying mark of one who is truly in fellowship with God and living in the light. Confessing our sin is the first step to freedom. We cannot be cleansed of our sin and enter into fellowship with God if we deny we have sin. If we confess that we are sinful, by our nature and our actions, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Our sin is a debt he forgives and a stain he cleanses. What amazing love!

The Bible assures us that when we receive the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ we enter into fellowship with God. We have been adopted into his family and sealed and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. For the redeemed in Christ, the old has gone and the new has come. We are new creatures, transformed from the inside out. We have moved from death to life. But our daily sins are an ongoing struggle. We are called to battle against our flesh and sin, not because it separates us from God, but because sin so easily entangles us and hinders us from running with perseverance the race he has marked out for us.

Our proper response to sin is not to deny it but to admit it, and then receive the forgiveness through Jesus Christ that God has promised us. Confessing our sins and exposing them to the penetrating light and cleansing love of God allows for the heavy burden and guilt of sin to be removed and lifted off our shoulders. I am reminded of King David's reflection on the blessing of confessing his sin before the Lord:

Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed are those whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD."

And you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Ps 32:1-5)

Our act of confession is not to be limited to merely a private acknowledgement of our sin before God. However difficult or intimidating it may be, confessing our sin to a close brother or sister in Christ is also an important element in our healing process. "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Prayer and confession bring the darkness of our sin into the light, where we find restoration in our fellowship with God and one another.

Our battle to persevere in our faith and struggling against sin is an ongoing issue for all of us, so confession is a wonderful gift. In Christ, without fear of condemnation, we are free to be honest with ourselves and with each other. God's mercy and grace is available to us without measure. It is like a waterfall that never dries up. If you think you have blown it with God beyond repair, think again. There is no magnitude or multitude of sin in your life that he cannot forgive and cleanse.

One of the questions before us this morning is this: Are you walking on the path of darkness or on the path of light? Some of you may be walking on the path of darkness in ignorance and others deliberately. Either way, this word from the Lord is for you. If your eyes have been opened to your sin, if your heart has been softened to turn from your dark path, give yourself over to the Lord. Confess your sins to him. Receive the gift of salvation and redemption, and walk in the light of his love and truth.

Some of you have an authentic fellowship with God through his Son Jesus Christ, yet are harboring unconfessed sin. You are still clinging to your sin, your sexual immorality, your anger, your lies, your hypocrisy. Go before your Heavenly Father who knows all about it and confess your sins to him. Receive his cleansing and forgiveness, and find relief from the burden of guilt and shame that rests heavily on your shoulders.

There is no better moment than right now to speak with the Lord about the condition of your heart and the nature of your actions. Wherever you are in your spiritual journey, be honest with yourself and with him. He loves you. He is ready to welcome you into his open arms. Confess your sins to him, receive his cleansing and forgiveness, and live in his light.

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