

1 JN. 1:5 – 2:6

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II. 1 Jn. 1:5 – 2:6 – Ethical implications of the message

A. The message heard (1:5)

1. ⁵*And this is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you* – John is proclaiming a message he heard from the Lord Jesus. What he's about to announce is a part of that authentic, original message to which he referred in his prologue. As such, it is an element of the gospel which is essential for fellowship to exist; it is something fundamental, at least in concept if not in precise formulation.

2. *God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.*

a. John is using light here primarily to symbolize God's holiness, his flawless perfection. The comparison of good and evil with light and darkness was well known in the ancient world. A prime example from the O.T. is Isa. 5:20, which states: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness." Places in the N.T. where light and darkness are used in moral contrast include Rom. 13:11-14 and Eph. 5:6-14, and there seems to be a moral element to the contrast in Jn. 11:9-10.

b. I think Marshall has it right in stating (p. 109):

The contrast between God and darkness is expressed as strongly as possible. The point is . . . that living in the darkness is incompatible with fellowship with God. This makes it clear that the writer is thinking of light and darkness predominantly in ethical terms; it is his way of saying: "God is good, and evil can have no place beside him."

c. Similarly, Leon Morris says ("1 John," in *New Bible Commentary*, 1400): "To say that God is light is to draw attention to his uprightness, his righteousness. Light is a natural symbol for attractive righteousness, just as darkness is for the blackness of sin."

d. This message, this axiom – that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all – forms the basis of what follows. This is what we are teaching people, in so many words, when we tell them that their sin separates them from God. His absolute, atomic-white purity is incompatible with sin.

B. Implications of that message (1:6-10)

⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in the darkness, we lie and do not do the truth. ⁷But 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. ⁸If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹[But] if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just so that he forgives us the sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in the darkness, we lie and do not do the truth.

a. John is refuting the false teachers' claim to have fellowship with God.

They claimed to have fellowship with God but the fact they were "walking in darkness" shows that the claim is a lie. These people had fooled themselves into thinking they were right with God when they were not.

b. Walking is a well known Jewish metaphor for how one lives. Indeed, one of the definitions given in BDAG (p. 803) for the word (*peripateō*) is "to conduct one's life." To walk in darkness is to conduct one's life without awareness of or regard for the will of God; it is to live in sin.

(1) That's why he says that those who walk in darkness "do not do the truth." He uses that same expression in Jn. 3:21 where it clearly means the opposite of "doing evil." As Colin Kruse points out (p. 63): "[The phrase 'does the truth' in Jn. 3:21] suggests that here in 1 John 'doing the truth' means living in the light of the truth and seeking to avoid sin. It is not enough to claim to know God (as the secessionists did); people also must live in the light of that truth, putting it into practice and avoiding sin."

(2) That walking in the darkness involves living in sin is confirmed by 2:11 where John says, "But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes."

c. As I indicated, the false teachers had constructed a theological system by which they negated the reality or significance of their sin. Whatever they were telling themselves, they in fact were living in sin, walking in darkness, and since that is incompatible with the character of God as light, their claim to be in fellowship with God while living in sin was a lie. John says much the same thing in 2:4: "The one who says, 'I have known him' and does not keep his commandments is a liar."

d. John is making the same point Jesus made in Mat. 7:21-23 (ESV):

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say

to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

2. ⁷*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.*

a. In contrast to the false teachers who lie by claiming they have fellowship with God while walking in darkness, while not doing the truth, those who walk in the light have fellowship with one another and receive an ongoing cleansing of all their sin through Jesus' death on the cross.

b. That walking in the light refers to conducting oneself ethically or morally is apparent not only from the fact it is contrasted to walking in darkness, which as I just argued has an ethical sense, but also from 2:5b-6 where John tells them, "By this we may know we are in him: the one who claims to abide in him ought himself to walk just as that one walked." It is the sense in which Paul tells them in Eph. 5:8-9, "Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)."

c. This verse makes clear, as do the following verses (vv. 8, 10, 2:1), that walking in the light does not mean living sinlessly. On the contrary, if we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves (vv. 8, 10), which is what the false teachers were doing. Walking in the light means that our lives will not be *characterized by* disobedience. It means our sins will be in a context of an overall surrender to the will of God, and because of that we will confess them and renounce them when we recognize them. The one who walks in darkness has accepted his sin and is not interested in bringing his life in line with the will of God. Of course, individuals will vary in how successfully they live out their commitment to obey, but that is different than not having the commitment.

d. It seems obedience has gotten a bad name in the church. If you speak these days as John does here and elsewhere, if you say boldly that those who walk in darkness, who live in sin, will not be saved regardless of whether they claim to have faith in Christ, in some quarters you'll be labeled a legalist, an enemy of grace. Those who think that way have succumbed to an unbiblical view of faith, a view that reduces it to mere mental assent to the truth of a proposition rather than a wholehearted surrender to the Lord who is the object of that faith. In the terminology of Jas. 2:14-26, they have mistaken "dead" faith for the faith that saves.

e. I certainly am not alone in thinking that obedience has fallen on hard times.

(1) New Testament scholar Gary Burge writes (p. 105-106):

Many of us recoil at the mere word "obedience." I often meet students who have grown up in conservative churches and families where obedience and righteousness

were pounded home so often that today they have been pushed aside as vehicles of death and suffocation. *Obey?* such students ask. *God loves me. Let me simply enjoy him and live.* For some of us, promoting obedience is difficult particularly when we ground our salvation in the rich goodness and charity of God. Nevertheless, John could not be clearer.

Sometimes I wonder if our concern to support the Reformation teaching about grace has sabotaged any hope for this call to obedience. We frame the theology of the New Testament as a series of juxtapositions: the synagogue versus the church, Jesus versus Moses, Paul versus the Jerusalem legalists, grace versus law. In doing so, we forget that Paul's first concern was *works of Jewish ritual that were thought to earn some benefit from God.* Paul can at once say that the Christian life should display *good works* and yet that we are not saved *by works.* Paul endorsed no compromise to the believer's pursuit of righteousness. The same is true of Jesus. . . . This is a difficult paradox: Personal righteousness and obedience are an essential component of our faith and yet do not form the basis of our salvation.

(2) The well known Evangelical preacher John MacArthur wrote in 1988 in his book *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 16 (from Burge, 108):

The gospel in vogue today holds forth a false hope to sinners. It promises them they can have eternal life yet continue to live in rebellion against God. Indeed, it encourages people to claim Jesus as Savior yet defer until later the commitment to obey Him as Lord. It promises salvation from hell but not necessarily freedom from iniquity. It offers false security to people who revel in the sins of the flesh and spurn the way of holiness. By separating faith from faithfulness, it leaves the impression that intellectual assent is as valid as wholehearted obedience to the truth. Thus the good news of Christ has given way to the bad news of an insidious easy-believism that makes no moral demands on the lives of sinners. It is not the same message Jesus proclaimed.

f. I am afraid that until we expect and insist on holiness from our brothers and sisters, the church will not be the beacon God intended it to be and will fall prey to trying to attract and keep people with superficialities. A world mired in sin needs to know, in the words of the famous hymn "Rock of Ages," that Christ is sin's "double cure" – he cleanses from sin's guilt *and* power. As I have said a number of times, a Christian is not the same person in a new situation; a Christian is a new person in a new situation. Praise God!

g. Remember that John is writing to a specific group of Christians in a specific situation. He is not writing a general tract on how to be saved; his addressees already were saved. John was trying to keep them that way by encouraging them and warning them about the false teachers who were threatening them. Things like the necessity of baptism simply were not an issue. Isolating John's statements from the context of the letter will wreak theological havoc.

h. It is interesting that John says the consequence of faithful living is fellowship with *one another*. The false teachers boasted about their fellowship with God, but they neglected their fellowship with men, or more specifically, with the faithful Christians. John wants to remind them that they cannot have fellowship with God without having fellowship with other Christians. It's a package deal: to have fellowship with God is to have fellowship with all Christians, with all who are in fellowship with God.

3. ⁸*If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*

a. John is here refuting another of the false teachers' claims. Based on John's other uses of the phrase "to have sin," all of which are in the Gospel of John (Jn. 9:41, 15:22, 24, 19:11), it seems he "is warning people who have sinned that they cannot claim 'We are free from the guilt of sin'" (Brown, 206; see also, Kruse, 66). In fact, the ESV translates the phrase in John 9 and 15 as "have guilt" and "be guilty of sin." In Jn. 19:11 it clearly refers to having committed a sinful act.

b. Kruse writes (p. 66):

The expression 'to have sin' (*echō hamartian*) is found only here in 1 John, but it occurs four times in the Fourth Gospel (John 9:41; 15:22, 24; 19:11), and in each case it means to be guilty of sins. Allowing this usage to guide us, we would have to say that what the secessionists were claiming was, not that they were by nature free from the sin principle, but that they were not guilty of committing sins, by which they probably meant they had not sinned since they came to know God and experienced the anointing.

c. As I've indicated, perhaps they got there by thinking that wrong actions were irrelevant (and thus not "sinful" in any meaningful sense) in light of the liberation of their spirits from the prison of this evil material world. Irenaeus says that Carpocrates, a second-century heretic, claimed "that there were no wrong actions for the enlightened and urged wicked deeds with impunity as a way of showing one's freedom from the powers that rule the world" (Brown, 206).

d. John's reply simply is that they are deceiving themselves and the truth is not in them. Denying that sinful conduct is indeed sinful is implicitly to denigrate the absolutely holy God, who is the standard by which sinfulness is judged, and to misjudge the depth of our need for grace. Those who do so do not have the truth in them in the sense the truth has not taken control of their thinking. If it had, they would be conscious of their sin.

e. Piper comments:

In this life we never get beyond the awareness of remaining sin. Therefore one of the great signs of maturity in Christ is a deep and abiding brokenness for sin.

There is much talk today about esteeming ourselves as new creatures in Christ. And so we are. But our newness consists in this: that the true light is shining in our hearts revealing the dreadfulness of our remaining sin and the abundance of God's grace. Our great joy is that our sin is forgiven in Christ. And our great grief is that so much of this very sin remains and defiles.

The mark of the new creature in Christ is not a rosy self-concept. It is brokenness for remaining sin mingled with a joyful confidence in the superabounding grace of God in Christ.¹

f. Our confidence in the amazing grace of God must never lead us to trivialize sin. Mercy certainly is ours in Christ, but we must hold that truth with the truth that sin is monstrous, the very thing for which our Lord suffered. That awareness keeps us humble before the Lord, mindful of our utter lack, and appreciative of his incomparable greatness.

g. The temptation to deny one's sin is common. It is unpleasant to face ourselves in our sin, so we construct ways to deny it.

(1) Our ways tend not to be as theologically complex as those of John's opponents, but the effect is the same. We redefine sin so as to exclude the conduct in which we're engaging or we trivialize it in the name of the grace.

(2) I have told some of you the story of the frontier settlement in the West whose people were engaged in the lumbering business. The town wanted a church, so they built a building and hired a preacher. The preacher had been there several months when one day he saw some members of the congregation intercepting logs that a town upstream had floated down the river. He watched them saw off that town's brand and mark the logs as their own. It was just like cattle rustling but with logs. Well, the next Sunday he preached a forceful sermon on the text, "Thou shalt not steal." At the close of the service people lined, shook his hand, and praised the sermon as usual, but the next week he once again saw the members of the congregation stealing logs. This really bothered him, so the next Sunday his topic was, "Thou shalt not saw off the brands of thy neighbors' logs." At the close of that service, they ran him out of town.

4. ⁹[But]² if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just so that he forgives us the sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

¹ From http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/46/476_Let_Us_Walk_in_the_Light_of_God/

² Brown states (p. 207), "This is an *ean* condition with the present subjunctive as in v. 7a, but with the adversative idea expressed by asyndeton rather than by a *de* particle as there."

a. The reference to "sins" (plural) indicates John is speaking of sinful acts rather than sin as a general propensity or condition. The fact this is contrasted with "we do not have sin" in the preceding verse reinforces the view that "we do not have sin" refers to being guilty of sinning. Instead of saying "we do not have sin," we are to admit that we commit sins.

b. The proper Christian attitude toward sins is not to deny them but to confess them. Marshall points out in his commentary (p. 113), "To confess our sins is not merely to admit we are sinners, but to lay them before God and to seek forgiveness." According to the *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (2:515), "The intention is not only an inner admission, but also an open confession of sins before God. The author of 1 John shares with ancient Judaism both the conviction that confession of sins is the precondition for God's forgiveness and the certainty that God responds to confession of sin with the comfort of forgiveness." See also, Strecker, 31-32.

c. Confession is the expression of a penitent heart, the reaction to sin of one who is walking in the light. It is the Lord's prayer – forgive us our debts/sins (Mat. 6:12/Lk. 11:4) – applied to concrete cases. If we confess our sins rather than insist on continuing in them, we receive from God forgiveness and cleansing. Praise God!

d. Notice that John speaks of sin as both a debt to be forgiven and as a stain to be cleansed. In sinning we have both denied God his due and defiled ourselves before him.

e. In forgiving our sins and cleansing our unrighteousness, God is both faithful and just. He is faithful because he has promised to forgive and cleanse. He is just in doing so either because it is just or right to honor one's promises or because the death of God's Son has provided for a just forgiveness, i.e., a forgiveness in which sin does not go unpunished.

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

a. In v. 8 John quoted the false teachers' claim "we do not have sin." Here he quotes their claim "we have not sinned" (perfect instead of present tense). Some think there is a material difference between these claims, but with Colin Kruse and others, I think the essential meaning is the same. John repeats the claim of v. 8 in different words to make the point that those who say that not only deceive themselves (v. 8) but actually make God a liar (v. 10).

b. They call God a liar because they are denying his declaration that all people are sinners. As Marshall says (p. 115), "Paul's statement that 'all have sinned' (Rom. 3:23) is no isolated remark; it sums up the teaching of Scripture on the universality of sin." Indeed, this teaching is implicit in John's statement in 4:10 that God "sent his Son to be an atoning sacrifice *for our sins*."

c. Because they contradict God's own testimony on the matter, it is clear his word is not "in them"; they have not internalized or accepted it. You see a parallel to this idea in Jn.

5:37-38 where Jesus says that their refusal to believe in the one God sent shows that his word does not dwell in them.

C. Clarification and assurance (2:1-2)

My little children, I write 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; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for [the sins] of the whole world.

1. *My little children, I write these things to you so that you may not sin.*

a. John does not want his comments emphasizing the fact Christians are guilty of sin and receive ongoing forgiveness to be misinterpreted as a license to sin or a reason to be casual about sin. Paul faced the same concern in Rom. 6:1 – "What then shall we say? Should we continue in sin so that grace may increase?" The goal must be to live without sin, as he emphasized in vv. 6-7, and the fact we don't succeed cannot be allowed to invalidate that goal.

b. This is the note I believe the church has become too reluctant to sound. We have in too many cases swallowed the notion that boldly calling people not to sin, calling them to holiness of life, is contrary to the truth that our standing with God is a gift that is not gained by our works or obedience. The idea has taken root that calling people to a radical holiness is done at the expense of proclaiming God's grace. The result of this false conflict is that we tend to understate the horror of sin, which I fear has caused some not to take it as seriously as they should. We need to be clear that our salvation is by grace through faith and not by works, but we also need to be clear that sin is a grave matter.

2. *But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for [the sins] of the whole world.*

a. Though God's call is that we not sin, when we do sin, as vv. 8 & 10 make clear we will, if we will "confess" that sin as mentioned in v. 9, rather than denying it, we can rest assured that we are forgiven. What a promise! Its power is seen more clearly if you substitute specific sins: if anyone does get drunk, steal, fornicate, curse, commit adultery, engage in homosexual conduct, hate, lie, etc. we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

b. That assurance stems from the fact our advocate (*paráklētos*) with the Father is Jesus Christ the righteous one. The one who represents us is the one who died for us in obedience to and in fulfillment of God's plan (4:10). No one he represents is condemned.

c. The fact God the Father sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice, as John says in 4:10, means we cannot think that Jesus has to overcome some reluctance to forgive on the part of the Father. It is clear from Rom. 3:21-26 that God initiated this sacrifice of his Son, this outpouring of wrath, so that he might forgive consistently with his holiness. He is not being

persuaded to forgive, as though he is reluctant to do so; rather, he provided the way to forgive consistently with his nature.

d. Christ's advocacy on our behalf is not a matter of persuasion but an expression of the very plan of the Father. He represents us in the blood of his sacrifice. In the words of Wesley's famous hymn "Arise My Soul Arise":

Arise, my soul, arise; shake off thy guilty fears;
The bleeding sacrifice in my behalf appears:
Before the throne my surety stands,
My name is written on His hands.

He ever lives above, for me to intercede;
His all redeeming love, His precious blood, to plead:
His blood atoned for all our race,
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

e. His death not only atoned for the sins of all Christians but potentially for the sins of all people (see also, Jn. 1:29; 1 Jn. 4:14). Its efficacy will never be exhausted. In the words of Kruse (p. 75), "We might suggest that Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world because his death was sufficient to deal with the sins of the whole world, but that his sacrifice does not become effective until people believe in him."

D. The ethical point repeated as a condition of that assurance (2:3-6)

³And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴The one who says, "I have come to know him" and does not keep his commandments is a liar, and in this one the truth is not. ⁵But whoever keeps his word, truly in this one the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may know we are in him: ⁶the one who claims to abide in him ought himself to walk just as that one walked.

1. *³And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.*

a. When John says that he and his readers can "know" that they have come to "know" him, he uses "know" in two different senses. They can "know," in the sense of knowing it is the case, that they "know" him, in the sense of being in fellowship with him. In other words, they can be confident they have a relationship or are in fellowship with him.

b. By "him" John probably means God the Father. Though Jesus (God the Son) is the nearest person to the pronoun, both Father and Son are mentioned in v. 2. More importantly, the false teachers, like the full-blown Gnostics who succeeded them, boasted about their relationship with God the Father. You can see in 1:5-6 that their claim was to have fellowship

with God, and in 2:22-23 it is clear that they claimed this relationship in distinction from a relationship with Jesus.

c. The way they can be confident that they have a relationship with God is if they keep his commandments.

(1) John is trying to reassure the faithful, who have been made insecure about their relationship with God by claims of the false teachers, and to expose the false teachers as people who are deceived about their own relationship with God.

(2) Keeping God's commandments is not the way to *gain* a relationship with God; rather, it is a characteristic of those who *have* a relationship with God. In other words, a relationship with God necessarily has moral consequences; it affects the way we live.

(3) John is well aware that no one keeps the commandments flawlessly. He just made that clear in 1:8-10. But failing to keep the commandments flawlessly is a far cry from failing to take them seriously, as the false teachers apparently were doing. As John Stott writes (p. 95): "If it is objected that in this case no-one knows God, because no-one is perfectly obedient, we may reply with Calvin: 'he does not mean that those who wholly satisfy the Law keep His commandments (and no such instance can be found in the world), but those who strive, according to the capacity of human infirmity, to form their life in obedience to God.'" So also Marshall, ("The question is whether I am trying [and to some extent succeeding] to keep God's commandments," 124) and Kruse ("those who know God will not be characterised by disobedience to his commands," 79).

(4) We tend to think that since obedience is inadequate to save anyone, because it is imperfect, it cannot provide any assurance of one's relationship with God, but that's exactly what John says it provides. I'm afraid that in our noble desire to honor God's grace we sometimes have robbed brothers and sisters of a God-given means of assurance. It's not legalistic or prideful for a person to recognize when he keeps God's commandments (in the imperfect sense John means). Indeed, in 2:8 John tells his readers that the new command to love one another in a Christian sense was a reality in their lives as it was in Christ's. One can know whether one's faith in Christ has made a difference in how one lives, whether the Spirit is producing fruit in one's life.

(5) Of course, John is writing to those who make an orthodox profession of faith, those who believe in the true incarnation of Christ. He's not suggesting that obedience divorced from such a confession provides any assurance of a relationship with God.

2. ⁴*The one who says, "I have come to know him" and does not keep his commandments is a liar, and in this one the truth is not.*

a. John is here saying essentially the same thing he said in 1:6. Stott explains the verse succinctly (p. 95): "The positive principle of the previous verse is illustrated by a negative example. A person's words must be tested by his works. If he disobeys God's commandments, his

claim to have come to know God is a lie (cf. 1:6). His conduct contradicts his profession and proves it to be false." This is what Jesus meant when he said in Lk. 6:46, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?"

b. The thoughts and judgments of the person who claims a relationship with God without obedience are not controlled by the truth.

3. ⁵*But whoever keeps his word, truly in this one the love of God has reached perfection.*

a. With many commentators, I take "of God" as an objective genitive, as in 2:15 and 5:3, rather than a subjective genitive. (The same ambiguity is in a phrase like "appreciation of the workers.") The NIV '84 opted for God's love for us (subjective sense) in the text but footnotes the objective possibility; the TNIV and NIV '11 reverse this. The RSV opts for our love for God (objective sense) in the text.

b. The person who keeps God's word is the one who truly has a mature or complete love for God (unlike the false teachers). Otherwise it is a deformed love, something incomplete and short of true biblical love. That's why Jesus could say in Jn. 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," and 1 Jn. 5:3 states, "for this is love for God, that we keep his commandments." The love of which God speaks is more than mere sentiment or feeling; it is inextricably bound to our conduct.

4. *By this we may know we are in him: ⁶the one who claims to abide in him ought himself to walk just as that one walked.*

a. The way we can know we are "in him," meaning the way we can be assured that we have an intimate communion with God, is by the axiom that the one who claims such a relationship must walk as Jesus did ("that one" being a reference to Jesus elsewhere in the letter – 3:3, 5, 7, 16, 4:17). So if we live as Jesus lived, we can know we have that relationship with God; if we do not live that way, then our claim to have that relationship is a lie.

b. Here is how Kruse (p. 82) states the thrust of vv. 3-6: "Those who keep God's commands may have assurance that they are people who know God; those who claim to know God while not obeying his commands are liars; those who say they live in God must walk as Jesus walked, that is, keeping God's commands to them as Jesus obeyed God's commands to him."