

1 John 1:5-2:2

Sermon preached on Sunday 10th January 2010 at BHAC, North Turramurra.

I can't remember the exact day, but on Tuesday or Wednesday night last week I was watching TV when an advertisement came on the likes of which I have never seen before.

It was the most *uninspired* ad I have ever seen...the ad simply consisted of a single, static screen with red writing on a white background. A voiceover accompanied the ad, but the voice simply read aloud what was displayed on the screen.

As I said, totally uninspired...and yet it immediately grabbed my attention. Which I suspect (paradoxically) is actually the *opposite* of what the ad was designed to do.

At the top of the ad was the word "Retraction." The ad was placed by a pharmaceutical company that makes a product called "Ease-A-Cold", and the reason they placed the ad was because they were *forced* to by the Therapeutic Goods Advertising Panel.

What Ease-A-Cold had claimed was that their product could "shorten a cold". But when someone complained, and the company was asked to show any evidence that their product could actually *do* this, they couldn't, and so they were forced to make this embarrassing (and, I suspect, *costly*) retraction.

You see, we live in a time and in a part of the world where there are authorities who take a very dim view of advertisers who make claims which have the potential to *mislead* or *confuse* or *exploit* people. They say: "It **matters** that you made this erroneous claim...and now you need to set the record straight."

Now, as we continue our sermon series in 1 John this morning, we see that same sort of principle at work. There were people in the early church who were making claims about God, and about how to relate to him and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and about **sin** and **ethics** and **morality**...

But they were **false** claims, and like false *advertising* these false claims had not only the *potential*, but had clearly had already *begun*, to *mislead* and *confuse* and *exploit* people in the early church and lead them away from the truth.

And so John... as an authoritative spokesman for God...well, there wasn't much chance of getting the false teachers to make a retraction, so *he* sets the record straight.

And we might ask ourselves: is it important for *us* not to be misled about God and how we relate to him, and about sin and morality and forgiveness? Sure it is. So let's come to this passage expecting that God will speak to us as we look at it this morning.

There were *three* claims that the false teachers in the church to which John wrote had made. They're stated clearly by John in v. 6 and v. 8 and v. 10. I say the false teachers *made* them, though John doesn't explicitly say they did. In fact, he says "If *we* claim..."

But I think it's likely that these were claims that the false teachers who had left the church had made, and were *still* making and trying to persuade those left behind to believe. So John's task (as an apostle of Christ) is to set the record straight for those who might be tempted also to

adopt such thinking. “If *we* were to make these claims,” John in effect says, “then we would be wrong for *these* reasons.”

So let’s look at the three claims. The first, as I said, is in v. 6:

If we claim to have fellowship with him [God] yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.

The issue is: what is the characteristic of the Christian life? What does it look like? What are its hallmarks? It appears that the false teachers were saying (something like), “It’s not *that* important how you live your life. It’s not your **behaviour** or your **morality** or your **lifestyle** that counts. What’s important is your spiritual connection...your *fellowship*...with God. Indeed, you can have fellowship with God **irrespective** of your lifestyle or your behaviour.”

“Walking in the darkness” is the metaphor John uses to describe that sort of lifestyle. It’s a lifestyle characterised by **immorality** and **ungodliness** and **unrighteousness**. The word “darkness” commonly has ethical overtones in the OT...in fact, it’s used as a metaphor for *wickedness* in almost every religion in the world.

So John says, “Well, let’s think about the logic of this claim: that you can have fellowship with God and at the same time live wickedly.” Think about God. He writes v. 5:

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

“God is light.” It’s the flipside to the darkness metaphor, isn’t it?

The OT said:

“The LORD is my light and my salvation” (Psalm 27:1).

In Psalm 36 it says,

“For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.” (v. 9)

In Psalm 104 it says,

“You are clothed with splendor and majesty. He wraps himself in light as with a garment.” (v. 1-2)

In each of these verses, light is a striking metaphor pointing to God as the true source of **revelation** and **hope** and **excellence** and **power**... but also of **holiness** and **purity**. For again, there are ethical overtones to the metaphor of “light”. And John says: “This ‘light’ metaphor so completely defines who God is—in his nature and character and deed—that there is no room for ‘darkness’ in him... at all.”

And so, if that is the case, what will the lives of those who claim to have fellowship God *be like*? In the OT, God says to his people: “Be holy, as I am holy.”

Well, it’s clear isn’t it? We’ve got to be godly. To say or do otherwise is to lie and not live by the truth.

Now, at this point John goes on to say what happens when a believer *does* walk in the light. There are two things he mentions, and both contain a bit of a surprise. John says, v. 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.

The first result of walking in the light like God does, is that we have fellowship *with God*. Only, he doesn't say that, does he?! He says "we have fellowship *with one another*." We *expect* John to say that if we walk in the light we have fellowship with God, because he is denying the possibility of having fellowship with God while walking in darkness.

But John skips over this obvious and logical implication to explore what inference living in the light has for our fellowship with *others*. It's as if he saying: our fellowship with one another is the place where we see our fellowship with God lived out.

And you see, the fact that the false teachers had **separated themselves** from John and his teachings, and from the other members of the church, was a perfect *antithesis* of this principle. The teachers claimed to have deep **fellowship** God, but the fact is true fellowship God is always expressed in fellowship with other believers...*which they had broken*.

John is saying: beware anyone who claims to bring fellowship with God but who won't fellowship with other believers.

Keeping fellowship: that's the first result of walking in the light. The second result of walking in the light is that (towards the end of v. 7):

...the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

I say this is a bit surprising because, at first glance, it seems a contradiction. If you need purifying from sin, then doesn't that imply that you are *not* walking in the light? If you need forgiveness, doesn't that imply that you've been walking in *darkness*?

Well, no. As will become clear in a second, "walking in the light" doesn't mean "never sinning". Part of what walking in the light means is that we're actually conscious of, and that we'll admit to, our sin.

And so John's point is that those who want to grow in godliness (who "walk in the light" but who know they sin along the way) can be *completely assured* of their forgiveness. Why? Because of the purifying blood of Jesus.

The purifying blood of Jesus is, of course, the blood he shed on the cross. God himself, in Christ Jesus, has done what needed to be done to prevent our sins from breaking fellowship with him. He has purified us. And he goes on purifying us, as we walk in the light. As we confess our sins and turn from them.

Do you believe this?

Now, that brings us to the second and third claims that John refutes in this passage. He writes, v. 8:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

And v. 10:

If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

The first claim by the false teachers was that wicked behaviour had no bearing on having fellowship with God. The second and third claims seem to imply that the false teachers questioned whether their behaviour was even sin *at all*. Evidently, they thought that they didn't need cleansing from sin because they hadn't sinned since they'd come to know God.

But for John, it was completely self-evident that they *had* sinned, and that they *did* sin; and to *deny* that was to be **deceived**, and it meant the truth was not in them, and worst of all, it meant that they made God out to be a liar.

Now, there's a real paradox here, when you think about it. If (unlike these false teachers) you *admit* that you're a sinner...if you say (as does God's word) "I, along with everyone else in the world, have **sinned** and fall **short** of the glory of God..." If you say that, then you **tell the truth**, and that is actually *close* to the heart of God.

But if you **deny** that you have sinned, then you deceive yourself and the truth is not in you... your sins therefore remain upon you, **unconfessed** and **unforgiven**, and you are therefore *far* from the heart of God. The sinner who knows it is close to God. The person who doesn't think he's sinned is paradoxically far from him.

And so, what John clearly wants his readers, and us, to do...indeed what *God* wants us to do...is to resist the temptation to deny our sinfulness. But that is hard! It is, in truth, neither **flattering** nor **edifying** to have to admit that I have failed to live God's way...especially as Christian. It's *humbling* to have to say, "Lord, I have failed. I should know better, but I've messed up. I have been a fool. I have been **self-reliant** and **arrogant** and **greedy** and **unloving**...and there are a thousand things I should have done but haven't done..."

It's *humbling* to say that. That doesn't sit well with the spirit of our age, either, which basically frowns at self-abnegation. But God calls us to do *just this*: to confess that we **have** sinned, and that we **do** sin.

But how do we know that we're forgiven if we admit that we *have* sinned and *confess* them when we do? Verse 9 tells us:

If we confess our sins, he is **faithful** and **just** and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Two characteristics of God underpin our *confidence* in knowing that God smiles upon us when we confess our sins: God's **faithfulness** and God's **justice**.

In the OT, God promised that he would forgive the sins of those who confessed it to him. One example:

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18)

God promised forgiveness and cleansing. And what God promised, he is bound by his **faithfulness** to fulfil. And so he *did* fulfil it in Christ.

And we see God’s justice displayed in the means by which forgiveness comes: through God punishing sin: **not in us**, but in the death of his willing son, Jesus.

And what sorts of sins are covered by this promised forgiveness? End of verse 9: *All sins. All unrighteousness.* I wonder whether there are times when you feel (like I do occasionally) that there is some sin lurking in the background of your life that God has never forgiven. You’ve confessed it, but if you’re honest, you just have a lack of peace about whether God really has forgiven it. Friends, if that your experience, this passage is so important to grasp and believe. God cleanses us from all unrighteousness. All of it. Every sin.

As far as the east is from the west, says God, so far have I removed your transgressions from you.

And so, will you believe this promise afresh today? Will you honour God with your settled trust that he has indeed forgiven you? Let that be an expression of the outworking of God’s word to us today for each one of us.

And then finally, we come to the last couple of verses we’re looking at today, from the beginning of chapter 2. John writes:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--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.

For many verses, John has had the false teachers and their false teachings about sin and the Christian life in his sights, but now he turns his thoughts and his heart to the members of the church. “My dear children” he says, “I write this to you so that you will not sin.”

There was a chance that with all this talk about sin in the life of the believer...if sin was a *characteristic* of the Christian, and forgiveness was freely available, then some people might say “Well, it doesn’t matter then if I do sin.”

But that’s obviously not what John wants to happen. He wants his readers to admit that they *do* sin, and at the same to live *without* sinning. So whatever you do, don’t think that sin doesn’t matter. It does matter! Jesus said you should cut off your arm if it causes you to sin.

So don’t *excuse* sin. Don’t *cherish* it. Don’t think it’s a *trivial* issue. Don’t be satisfied with anything less in your life than taking significant steps in holiness and godliness.

But of course, yes, the reality is that you will sin. This side of heaven, *that* is inevitable.

And when we *do* sin, and admit it, the truths of verses 1 and 2 are our sweet remedy.

For these verses tell us that we (and indeed the whole world, should they want it) have an **advocate** in Jesus. Instead of accusing us for our sin, Jesus Christ, the righteous one, stands beside us and pleads our cause.

It's a picture of a law-court. And we're in the dock. We have sinned. We have spurned God. We have nothing to say in our own defence. We have nothing that we can say which will gain us acquittal for our sins. But Jesus "speaks to the Father in our defence..."

Jesus is like our barrister. He argues for our acquittal.

And on what basis does he do so? On the basis of his own death. John says "He is the **atoning sacrifice** for our sin." By taking *our* sins upon himself on the cross, Jesus lovingly absorbed God's rightful wrath that should have been upon us. That's what his sacrifice did. Jesus turned God's wrath away from us and onto himself. Jesus used it all up. God's wrath against us was fully and completely *spent* ...which was God's loving plan from the beginning of time.

So when John tells us that Jesus pleads for us in our defence, it's not as if he trying to cajole a grumpy judge. It's not as if Jesus is the kindly barrister and God the Father is the irascible judge. No, our Father in heaven is so inclined towards us. He loves us...he did not even spare his own son, such was his love.

Now, isn't that remarkable? The gospel truly is *astounding*, isn't it?

And so, as I conclude I want to urge you to ponder these astounding truths and let them shape your relationship with God.

Let none of us say "Sin doesn't matter." Let none of us think "It doesn't matter how I live my life...God will forgive me, that's his job." Let none of us grow complacent about what the real cost of our forgiveness is. Let none of us have anything but wonder and thankfulness at the blood Jesus shed for us.

And let none of us go from this place with anything but joy in our hearts for what God has promised he will do when we confess our sins to him.

Amen.