

The Man who Rationalizes Sin

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In this present series in the First Letter of John we are concerned with the great and pressing question of maintaining an intimate and, therefore, powerful and fruitful fellowship with the Son of God. It is fellowship which makes Christian life vital, compelling, effective, and worth the living.

We have seen before that there are two ties we may have with Christ: There is the matter of relationship which is established by the response of our faith to the invitation of his Word. You come to know Jesus Christ by coming to him. He puts it on that basis. "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest," {cf, Matt 11:28}. "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink; out of his innermost being will flow rivers of living water," {cf, John 7:37-38}. That establishes relationship. It makes you one with Christ and opens the possibility of gaining all that he is in your experience. But fellowship, as John is making clear in this first letter, is the actual experience of his power and wisdom, his love and life at work in you. It is actually to come into a day-by-day experience of Christ working, living, and manifesting himself through you. There is nothing more exciting than that! And this experience of fellowship is continually yours if you live honestly before God and call the reactions of your life what God calls them, shunning all pretense and deceit. In other words, walking in the light is the secret of fellowship. Fellowship is the secret of power, and walking in the light is the secret of fellowship.

Now it sounds easy to do, does it not? Just to be open, to be honest, to not kid ourselves, to cease pretending to be something we are not; then all that God is, is available to us and we can live as God intended man to live in the fullness of fellowship, having all things in common with him. I do not suppose there is one of us here today who would not readily subscribe to the necessity of being hon-

est, but when it comes to translating it into practical living it is sometimes difficult to do.

The reason it is difficult is threefold. John goes right on to point out three very common conditions or practices which we employ to shut off the light of God that is shining upon us, in Christ, and thus cut us off from the fellowship of the Son of God and from fellowship with each other as well. For, as we are learning, we must all live in a vertical and horizontal relationship. If the vertical relationship is wrong, the horizontal one will be wrong. So frequently we get concerned about this horizontal relationship (our contacts with other people), and try to correct them on that level, but they are never correctable there, they can be changed only when the vertical is right. That is why John stresses this matter of fellowship so much.

There are only three kinds of conditions that can cut off fellowship. John has listed them for us here. Every failure in fellowship is explained right here in this first chapter of John's letter. If we are having difficulty experiencing all that is promised to us in the Scriptures, we shall find the reason for it here in these three practices. We have already looked at two of them:

1. First, there is the man who ignores light, i.e., the one who never stops to look at what the light reveals. The light of God, expressed in God's Word, is always shining on us. But far too frequently we never stop to look at what it reveals, we never examine ourselves. We have already seen this. We avoid the channels of light, such as the Word of God. We never read it. We avoid fellowship with other Christians, or at least contact with them too closely, for such contact can be a channel of light. We avoid coming to church, since that, too, is a channel of light. We do not like having the

light. We do not like having the light turned on and we try to walk through life never stopping to look at ourselves. That is an exceedingly dangerous position and one that always produces weakness.

2. Now, we saw also that there is a group of people who persistently deny the need for light, who believe that the possibility of sin has been removed, that they have advanced so far in the Christian experience that they can no longer sin, therefore they do not need light. This is, as you will recognize, an extreme form of self-righteousness, which John immediately labels self-delusion. Such are kidding themselves. We do not reach the place of perfect sinlessness in this life, and if we think we have, then we are simply walking in darkness, and therefore, walking in weakness.
3. Now, today, we come to the third of these conditions, the case of the man who rationalizes the sin which the light reveals.

It is described for us in Chapter 1, Verse 10, and, ignoring the chapter break, the first two verses of Chapter 2:

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

My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. {1 Jn 1:10-2:2 RSV}

Here is the man who rationalizes sin. I do not hesitate to say that this is the commonest failure in Christian experience – to rationalize sin.

In the first case we referred to, the man does not like what the light reveals so he keeps himself too busy ever to see it. In the second case, the person says there is no need for light because, he says, I cannot sin, therefore I shall just go on living the Christian life as I see it, since there is an automatic something in me that keeps me from falling into sin. But in this third case, the person is saying, “Of course, I *can* sin as a Christian, I know this. I do need light. But when I stop to look at my life, and examine myself, what I *see* is not sin. Weakness

and failure perhaps, but not sin. I may have to admit that I have been weak, but I have not sinned.” Now, that is what John means: “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

Essentially this is an evasion of fact, an evasion of reality. It is the exercise of that terrible power of the human mind which we call rationalization, the ability to clothe wrong so that it looks right, and evil so that it looks good. Who of us has not experienced this? We are all experts at it. We know well how to invent reasons to do what we want to do, and invent equally valid-sounding reasons to avoid what we want to avoid, and all the time make it sound as though there is really nothing we can do about it. There are perfectly understandable circumstances that keep us from doing these things. That is rationalization.

Someone handed me this week a comment by Richard DeHaan on the great electrical blackout in the New England states that occurred last year. Very few people realize that in England a very similar thing was occurring at the same time, but on a much more limited scale. The difference was that in the United States, we were calling it “a power failure,” in England they called it “a power reduction.” Well, it was a reduction, all right, all the way down to zero! But it illustrates the tendency we have, even in non-religious things, to tone down a word.

We do that with the word, *sin*. Many people really do not know what the word means, but all of us have an uncomfortable feeling about it. We know that it suggests something bad and we do not like to use it about ourselves. So we have invented a lot of very fancy names for it. What the Scripture would call sin, we call human frailty, or bad tendencies, or simply weakness, or a hereditary fault, or environmental kick-back. The fancier the name, the more we like it, because it sounds so much better than that simple, ugly, three-letter word, *sin*. Thus, one way of saying, “I have not sinned” is to rename it, and call it by a much pleasanter name. It is just as if you went through your medicine cabinet, took out all the bottles of poison and re-labeled them – perfume, hand lotion, etc. It does not change the character of the poison, but it does make it sound a lot better. The evil twist of our fallen natures is revealed in the fact that what others do, we call sin, but when we do the same thing, we have a different name for it:

- Others have prejudices; we have convictions.
- Others are conceited; but we have self-respect.
- When another man is lazy, we say so; but when we do not want to do something, we say we are too busy.
- When someone else goes ahead and acts on his own, we say he is presumptuous; when we do the same thing, we have initiative.
- When someone else gets angry and blows up, we say he has lost his temper; but when we do that, we are merely showing righteous indignation.

And as long as we can find a nicer label we never will treat the thing like the poison it is.

Now, we laugh at these things, but these are the reasons why we are weak as Christians. As long as we laugh at them, we never will do anything about them. We say, "Oh well, everyone does it. It is so common, even the Christians at church all do it."

As long as we take that attitude we shall always be in the grip of evil. We will never treat these things as the poison they are, as long as we permit ourselves to paste on a label that says something different, and call it perfume. Also we will never understand why we still go around crippled and ailing and acting as though some poison were sapping the spiritual strength from our lives.

Another way we do this is to excuse our sins, because of the pressure of circumstances we are experiencing:

- We say it is nerves that causes us to speak impatiently to one another.
- We say it is tiredness, fatigue, that makes us utter sharp words at home.
- We blame the pressure of work for losing our peace and making us worried, troubled, and harassed.

- We say it is our difficult neighbors that make us resentful and bitter. If it were not for them we could be sweet, lovely, and kind.

What we are saying is that the problem is not sin, it is circumstances. We do not need the cleansing of the blood of Christ. Obviously, if we sinned we would need that, but what we are saying is, we do not need this. What we need is our tensions unraveled by our psychiatrist. We are saying "I know I shouldn't have said that, or done this thing, but it's not really my fault. I can't help it. It's because of the circumstances and therefore it's not really sin. Sin is deliberate, sin is wilful, but I can't help myself and so I have not sinned."

Now put that alongside what John has said. "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." Again I say, there is nothing more common in Christian experience than this. After many years in the ministry, hearing many tales of problems, struggles, difficulties and hardship, I can say that this is far and away the most frequently-heard excuse for the weakness of Christian lives, this constant tendency to rename what is wrong or excuse it because of circumstance.

Now, look further at what John says. He says this is not only an evasion of reality, but it is also a direct accusation against God. "We make him a liar," he says, "and his word is not in us." In other words, we are not shifting the blame to some unknown, unstated individual, we are putting it squarely on God. The Christian always lives in direct relationship to God. There are only two people in life, as far as your basic relationship is concerned, you and God. So if we say it is not our fault, we are saying it is his fault:

"It's your fault, God, not mine. These circumstances that you've allowed me to get involved with make it impossible for me to obey you. Therefore, you're to blame. I want to do it. You know my heart. You know that I really want to be what I ought to, but, because of these circumstances, I can't, so it's really your fault!"

Now that is the oldest excuse in the world. It goes back to the Garden of Eden. When God came looking for man {see Gen 3:9 ff}, he said to him, "Why did you do this thing?" And man said, "Well, it's the woman you gave me. It's your

fault.” And when God said to the woman, “Why did you do it?” she said, “It is the serpent. It’s your fault because you let him talk to me.” So, the blame comes right back to God. We are, in effect, calling God a rascal and a double-crosser. But John uses even a worse name. He says, “we make him a liar.”

The Word of God makes clear that the Christian has a source of strength in Christ that is imparted to him from within. We are inwardly strengthened by him. As Paul puts it, “our inner man is renewed, day by day,” {cf, 2 Cor 4:15}. The outer man can perish, but the inner man is being renewed daily. Therefore, nothing outward should hinder us.

In Romans, Paul cries, “What can separate us from the love of Christ?” {Rom 8:35 KJV}. Then he goes through the list of possibilities. Can life, or death, or things present (your circumstances), or things to come (the pressure of the future), or height, or depth, or time, or eternity, or anything else in all creation, separate us from the strength of Christ, the love of Christ. But that is not what we say. We say to God, “Yes, there are a lot of things that cut me off from you and make it impossible for me to do what you ask me to do. Difficulties cut me off, and fatigue, and sickness, and pressure. Therefore, God, you’re a liar. You say that none of these things will do it; I say they do! Now, one of us is telling the truth and one of us is lying, and I know who it is; it’s you!”

Now think of the enormity of that charge! Here is what we are constantly saying to God: “Lord, it is your fault, you are not true.” Here we are, mere human pygmies, standing before the faithful and unchanging God, the God who has revealed himself as without a shadow of turning, absolutely faithful, and charging him with faithlessness; we glory in the unchangeableness of God when it comes to our comfort. We love to speak of the unchanging God, the Refuge from every kind of pressure. Yet, how strange it is that we can stand before him the next moment and defiantly assert that the reason for our weakness is not our failure, but his. We declare he is not faithful to his Word, he doesn’t keep his promises, he denies himself, he’s a liar.

I have often quoted First Corinthians 10:13 to Christians in difficult circumstances, “There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to

be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” I have had them look me right in the eye, and say, without batting an eyelid, “That’s not true. I have been tempted already above what I’ve been able to bear. I can’t stand this thing.” How many times do we say that, in one way or another? But what is that but calling God a liar? Do we realize it is impossible for God to be wrong and us to be right? If that were true, we would be God, not him. It is simply an impossibility.

We need to read again the book of Job and see how Job learned this great lesson. Because he was going through terrible pain and hardship, his heart protested and cried out against God. There came a time when God said to Job,

“Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.”{Job 40:2 RSV}

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

**“Gird up your loins like a man;
I will question you, and you will declare to me.**

**Will you even put me in the wrong?
Will you condemn me that you may be justified?**

**Have you an arm like God,
and can you thunder with a voice like his?” {Job 40:6-9 RSV}**

In that amazing fortieth chapter God puts to Job a series of test questions, asking Job if he can perform even the simplest functions which God performs every day. And Job’s answer is,

“Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee?

**I lay my hands on my mouth.
I have spoken once, and I will not answer;
twice, but I will proceed no further.”**

{Job 40:4-5 RSV}

**“therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”**

{Job 42:6 RSV}

But the blunt truth is, we do not like our circumstances. Is that not it? We do not like where God puts us. We do not like the people or the pressures we have to live under, we do not like the cir-

cumstances that surround us, and we refuse to accept them. That is the real problem. Therefore, we are not interested in Christ's power to live in them. We do not want it. We have set our will against God's will. We have said, "You ask me to live my Christian life in these circumstances, but I don't want to do it." And we rationalize it all by saying we cannot help ourselves.

Now, let us be honest and admit that we fall because we do not choose to meet the circumstances with his strength, but we run away from them. We do not like them, we do not want to live in them, and therefore we blame it all on God. No wonder we lose fellowship. No wonder God seems to be our enemy, and things all go wrong. We find that peace has fled our hearts, we are troubled, harassed, worried, and upset. We find ourselves flying off the handle even more easily, and losing our patience and we are baffled by it all, not knowing what is causing all this.

Does this sound familiar? Well, John explains what the trouble is. In Verse 1, Chapter 2, he says,

My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin, but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, {1 Jn 2:1-2a RSV}

What does this mean?

Well, there is never any need to sin, but, if we find ourselves doing so, we have a perfect defense available to us; a defense which the Father will gladly receive, one that he already assures us will be welcomed. We have an Advocate with the Father who will rush to our defense immediately, but his defense is of no avail to us because we are still defending ourselves. There cannot be two advocates in this case. You either rely on his defense of you – the manifestation of his work on your behalf which has wiped away every stain, every sin which you ever will commit or ever have committed – or you must rely on your own defense. Here you are, standing before God, defiantly telling him that you are not to blame, that you have a defense. You are not guilty. You can explain all this by the pressure of circumstances, or it is really not what he says it is, it is something else, entirely.

Now, you see, as long as you remain defiant or evasive, you are still justifying and excusing yourself, and therefore the Judge can only condemn you,

and permit the inevitable, built-in judgment that follows to upset you, overthrow you, harass you, baffle you, and leave you in weakness and folly. But if you will stop justifying yourself, he will justify you. The blood of Jesus Christ cannot cleanse excuses. It only cleanses sins. If you will say, "Yes, it wasn't the pressure, it wasn't the circumstances, it wasn't that these things are not as bad as you call them, it's that I chose to be impatient, I chose to be resentful. I decided to be worried and to let anxiety grip me." If we come to that place, then we discover that there is One who stands before the Father and reveals to him the righteousness of his life, and God sees us in him, and we are cleansed and accepted. Strength again flows into the inner man, peace comes back to our hearts, we are cleansed of our sin, washed and restored to the grace of God. Then we can go back into the very same circumstance, under the very same pressure, in the very same disagreeable relationship, and find our heart kept by the grace and strength of God.

Paul puts it so beautifully, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God that passes all understanding [You cannot explain it. Someone says to you, "How can you be so calm in the midst of these circumstances?" And you say, "I don't know, but it must be because I'm trusting Christ, resting on him.'], the peace of God that passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus," {cf, Phil 4:6-7 KJV}. Now is that not practical? That is not designed for church, that is designed for life, for home, for work, for your relationship with your neighbors, and your boss, and your mother-in-law, your children, everyone.

Now, why does John say, "he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world?" Why does he put that in? Obviously he is drawing a contrast between Christians and non-Christians. He is reminding us that when the Lord Jesus died upon the cross 1900 years ago, he not only paid the debt of our sins, he not only took our guilt, as Christians, but he took the guilt of the whole world. He paid the price for every man. There is no man who will be kept away from God because of his sins, if he accepts the work of Christ on his behalf. Sin can never separate an individual from God, because of the cross of Christ. No matter how bad the sins, no matter

how extreme it may be, or how long continued, sin can never separate anybody, anywhere, in any time, or any age, from the heart of God, if the work of the cross be received. That is the extent of the expiation mentioned here. But why does he remind us of that in this context? The answer is: It is to help us see ourselves.

- Why is it that all the world is not reconciled to God?
- Why is it that these others, whose sins have been already settled for on the cross, are living in estrangement and hostility to the God who loves them and who seeks after them?
- Why is it that men are still defying God, and blaspheming God, and turning and running from him, and experiencing the death, darkness, and degradation that comes from not knowing?

You know the answer: Because they will not believe him. They will not accept his forgiveness. He has forgiven them, but they have never forgiven him. As Paul puts it in Second Corinthians 5, “We are ambassadors for Christ, for God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them. Therefore, we beseech men, be ye reconciled to God,” {cf, 2 Cor 5:20}. We do not have to say to God, “be reconciled to men”; we are saying to men, “be ye reconciled to God,” {2 Cor 5:20b KJV}.

Now, that is the very same reason why we Christians are not enjoying the full flow of the Spirit of power, life, love, and wisdom, in our experience. It is all available to us, but we will not receive it. That is what John means. Like the world, we are turning our back on it. We are say-

ing to God, “I’m not interested in cleansing because, you see, I really don’t need it. After all, this is not a sin, it’s simply a weakness, just an inherited tendency, something I got from my family. I can’t help it.” That kind of thing is cutting the ground out from under the whole redemptive work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Though his power is all-available, it is not experienced because of that.

Now let us bow before him.

In a moment of quietness before God, let us confess this terrible tendency that each of us has unquestionably experienced, to rationalize sin, to excuse it, justify it, call it something else, doll it up, sprinkle perfume on it and make it look better, instead of calling it exactly what it is. Christ has found a way below, around, and above our circumstances. He can reach us despite the pressures; it is just that we do not want it.

Prayer:

Our Father, in this moment of quietness, search our hearts. We have not come here merely to play at being Christians, we want to really be Christians. We need this probing, searching finger of the Spirit to touch us, and to unveil to us the closeted areas, these closed doors that we have shut away from thee. Make us open, make us to be honest, make us to stop this eternal excusing of ourselves and to face up to the wonderful reality of thy challenge and promise, that nothing can keep us from being what we ought to be, or no one can keep us from it. May we begin to live in that way, a fragrance in Jesus Christ. We pray in His name, Amen.