

BECOMING JESUS PEOPLE

by Steve Zeisler

I am becoming more and more captivated by the personality behind the document: 1 John. John was into his eighties, perhaps as old as ninety, when he finally died. All the others who knew Jesus in his time on earth were already gone. John was the last one who could speak with the confidence he did of the things he saw and heard and touched in his time with Christ. He had a unique perspective, at the end of the era, from which to admonish and encourage followers of Jesus.

In chapter 2 verse 1 the apostle makes a provocative statement: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin." (Everybody was younger than he was by this time, so he calls everyone his child.) He speaks of freedom from the grip of sinful behavior.

As we saw last week, chapter 1 ends with a series of declarations made by people who are trying to cover up what is wrong with them. Let's go back and look briefly at those again. Verse 6 says, "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie...." Verse 8 says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Verse 10 says, "If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives." One of the first critical lessons that we find addressed in this letter is our tendency to traffic in deception, to do anything we can to cover up the destructive things we despise about ourselves: hatred, lust, greed, uncontrolled anger, and so on. So John forthrightly says we must not be deceivers of ourselves or anyone else.

But then, having faced squarely the human tendency to cover what we hate about ourselves, he says, "Now I'm writing to you so that you will not sin." That is an extraordinary statement. He makes a similar statement in stronger terms in 1 John 3:5: "...You know that [Jesus] appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him." This appeal is genuine. We should somehow be free of the control of the worst side of us. But how can that be? What can John mean?

Below is an account issued by the Associated Press this week on Tuesday, May 2. It is a counterpoint to John's theme. I include it to appeal to contemporary Christians to hear the basic call of this man's writing. As important as it is for us to speak often, clearly, loudly, and forthrightly about the Christian approach to technology, family life, citizenship, economics, and everything else, we still need also to go back to the basics about what it means to be Christian. We must speak not just about how we apply Christian thinking in other places, but how we live our lives in intimacy with God so that we really are Christians.

The treasurer of the Episcopal church embezzled \$2.2 million and spent it on new homes, travel, jewelry, and tuition for her children while the financially strapped denomination was slashing staff and programs, the church said Monday. Ellen F. Cooke, who was treasurer for more than eight years, earned more than \$120,000 a year. "I am experiencing deep remorse and regret for the pain and grief my actions have caused my family, coworkers, and the general church," she said in a statement. Cooke also said that in the opinion of her psychiatrist, "I experienced a breakdown precipitated by factors external to me and related to the work place." She cited "the pain, abuse, and powerlessness during the years I worked as a laywoman on a senior level at the church headquarters."

It is always sad to have a public discussion of Christian leaders who are experiencing moral failure. But as unfortunate as it is to have to acknowledge again that such a thing has happened, the tragedy is the lack of Christianity in response to the problem.

But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-Jesus Christ,

the Righteous One. (1 John 2:2)

What do we do when we are discovered to have failed miserably, when our weaknesses and failures are made plain? A distinctively Christian response is so lacking here and so thrilling to encounter in John's letter. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness [1 John 1:9]." An experience of regret and remorse is not the same thing as a confession to God of sins for which we bear guilt.

Ms. Cooke announced that, according to her psychiatrist, "I experienced a breakdown precipitated by factors external to me..." That is exactly what John is talking about when he says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." We need to hear again that lies are foolish and deadly, that covering up what we don't like in ourselves gets us nowhere.

Walking in the light

But what realistic alternative does John then turn around and offer? "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin." In order to understand what he means, we need to think along with John in his categories, taking on life the way he is writing about it. What he is writing about is what he calls throughout this section our walk in life (see 1:6-7).

Let's read 2:1-11:

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.

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

When John says, "...I write this to you so that you will not sin," what he is talking about is our stance in life, our habits of life, the way we live, if someone were to gather up everything that is true about us. What kind of people are we, what direction are we going, what do we stand for? Think about the word "walk" for a minute. It is the concept embodied in this word that is behind this statement of John's.

When our children were little they used to play youth soccer. All of the kids wore exactly the same color of shirts, pants, and shin guards. Most of them even had the same haircut. They looked the same in every way. Early in learning to play soccer the idea of actually spreading out and passing the ball is an unknown concept. The game resembled a giant amoeba of kids swarming around the ball. But even when our kids were part of the mob of other kids, I could tell which one was mine by the way he or she ran and walked. I had watched my kids learn to walk from the beginning. I was familiar with the way they carried themselves, and it was from that as much as anything else that I could distinguish mine from the others. To this day I think my older son has a very distinctive gait.

In the first century, before they had cars or bicycles, before there were buses and trains and other modes of

transportation, people walked everywhere they went. So if the question was raised about your walk in life, you were being asked where you were going, who your companions would be on the journey, and what you valued enough to carry with you. All of those things are summarized by asking, as in 1:7, "Are you walking in the light or are you walking in the darkness? What kind of person are you?" John is saying, "I'm writing to you so that you will not sin. I'm writing to you so that you will be the kind of person who walks in the light."

There are two issues raised here regarding what keeps us from walking in the light and from avoiding sin. In the last message we saw that one is deception. And the other, which we'll consider next, is rebellion. But there are also two issues that we instinctively believe to be problems that are not. I want to talk about those, too, because we can be misled at times and live with unnecessary feelings of rejection and defeat.

Failure is not the problem

The first of these non-problems is failure, and the second is ignorance. We make more of both of these than we should. Look very carefully at verses 1-2: "...I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin [and I assume they will], 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." Failure in God's children is not a problem for him. He has seen us all fail many times. He does not recoil, sickened by our failures, hating us when we fall. Paul uses the phrase in Galatians, "[being] caught in a trespass." That speaks of being trapped by a snare, doing something that we would agree at the moment that we do it is moral failure, and we hate it as much as God does.

That does not put him off. Why? Because of what Jesus has done for us. We have an advocate who will live forever who stands in the presence of God and in the presence of the rest of the universe and says, "I defend my beloved on the basis of my atoning sacrifice." The failure does not attach itself to the child of God any longer, the guilt is no longer borne by them. God listens to his Son, and he declares us by his Son's advocacy not guilty.

Also in focus here is the historical action of Jesus: He gave up his life for us, "the atoning sacrifice for our sins." There is an objective, historical reason for us to say that none of our moral failures, our stupid choices, our weaknesses, and all that we hate about ourselves, ultimately result in guilt to us: Someone else paid a price. Twice earlier, this cleansing work of Christ was mentioned. In 1:7 we read, "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." And verse 9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Walking in the light is not destroyed by moral failure, by sins we have committed. We can be forgiven for those. In fact, if we walk in the light what we should expect is for regular cleansing to take place. We are in fellowship with one another and we help one another. There is honest accountability and seriousness about the faith. When our failure occurs it's clear to us and to other people, and our feet get washed. We admit what we've done and we reject it as God rejects it. It doesn't continue anymore; we're cleansed, and we continue walking in the light. Walking in the light includes getting cleansed every day. So we end each day saying, "Lord, I receive your forgiveness for what I've done today. I cannot defend it, it's not someone else's fault. My pain and regret and remorse accomplish nothing. It is my sin, I confess it for what it is. I receive the cleansing that goes with it. And tomorrow I will leap out of bed, walking in the light knowing of your approval, and get on with it."

Daily confession, frequent fellowship, and seriousness of purpose lead to changed lives. It is the whole process of being cleansed and taking God seriously that makes us want to do the wrong things less and less often. By rejecting them every day we find ourselves more likely to reject them from the heart, and our behavior changes.

I want to mention one additional point regarding failure. Verse 2 says Jesus is the atoning sacrifice not only for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world. The point there is not to argue the nature of the atonement; whether it is peculiar to believers or universal for everyone. I am convinced that this is not the point of John's remark at all. He is making a psychological argument, an effort to impress the heart.

Suppose your sin is really terrible, not just an embarrassing and unfortunate little peccadillo-couldn't it be that your sins weigh so much that perhaps they aren't included in the atonement Jesus made? But, John says, Jesus was the atoning sacrifice not only for your sin, but for all the sins of the whole world added together. We can't imagine a category, a sum, a wickedness, or a deadliness of sin that doesn't get included. So if you measure what you hate about yourself and put the sins of everyone in the whole world who has ever lived in every generation alongside it, yours doesn't weigh that much, relatively speaking. Even the totality of the sins of the whole world is forgiven, because we have an advocate with the Father and we have an atoning sacrifice that was sufficient. We're not disqualified by failure!

Ignorance is not an issue

The second thing that doesn't disqualify us from walking in the light is ignorance. Verse 3: "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands." There were some in the first-century church to which John was writing who were saying in effect, "Of course if you were a Christian you would have all the benefit of Jesus' advocacy and forgiveness. But how can you know that you're really a Christian? How can you know for sure that you have made the cut? How do you know that you're not someone whose appeal has been denied?" And the issue is, do we know enough? What about people who can quote a lot of Bible verses, who have long memories of service to God, and they knew so and so, and they were at this event, and they have that scholarly journal that they can quote, and they can speak in Latin and Greek. Are the people who know a great deal somehow more qualified? Can we ordinary, "plain vanilla," uncomplicated people be sure that our ignorance doesn't disqualify us?

But John says ignorance doesn't have anything to do with it. We can know that we have come to know him simply if we obey his commands. The real issues for the Lord are, are we telling the truth or trafficking in lies (we discussed this in the previous message), and have we settled once and for all who is in charge? Have I decided without equivocation, argument, extenuating circumstances that Jesus Christ is my Lord, my commander? If I hear his voice, will I do what he says? If that is true of me, then I can be sure that I know him.

Walking as Jesus did

Verse 4 says, "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him." This is not talking about failure; that is, a person who says, "I know what he wants me to do and I have failed to do it." What this is talking about is a person who says, "I know him, but I reserve the right to disobey him. I do not do what he commands on purpose because I know better. I will keep only some of the commands of Christ, the ones that appeal to me. I will change others to fit the circumstances. I will twist things to my benefit." This is about the one who claims to know him, but refuses to do what he commands. He is a liar.

In the long run, if we have decided without reservation that Jesus Christ has the right to direct us and command us and we obey his word from the heart, then as John goes on to say in verse 5, his love is "made complete" in us. We find ourselves more and more able to appropriate the love of God for us, and our lives become like Christ's. "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did." His life is the standard in the way he treated people, both friends and enemies; the way he loved God; the way he believed the Scriptures; and in the things that mattered to him. Christ-likeness is accessible to everybody, not just to an educated elite. We can walk as he walked, confessing our sins, walking in the light, having fellowship with one another, being cleansed, committed to obedience, refusing the desire inside us to set ourselves as a master in place of him.

Loving one another

In verse 7, if we have decided to bow the knee before our Lord, John says, "Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning... Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you..." What will John, the last apostle and the final spokesman, focus on as a command? A very simple thing. It is ancient because it goes back to the heart of God and was sown

into the created order. It is new because every day is filled with new opportunities to carry it out. Jesus boiled the Law down to two things: Love God and love your neighbor. John has grasped the second of these, and he says, "Love your brother." If we claim to be in the light but hate our brother, we are still in the darkness. Verse 10: "Whoever loves his brother [this obviously refers both to men and women and to people of any age] lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble." Our walk will be without stumbling. The radical commitment to love has claim on us because Jesus, our commander, has told us to love; we are obeying our Lord in doing so. That is how he lived, and that is how we must live.

Love is an active term. It is the exact opposite of indifference. Hatred is not just vicious thoughts about someone. It can be indifference toward them. In biblical terms, if we do not actively reach out in care for someone, we do not love them, and we therefore hate them. If we feel free to treat other folks that God brings into our path, other Christian people especially, with indifference, prejudice, haughtiness, or disregard, then we haven't learned the lesson.

At the end of John's life a man named Jerome, one of the second generation of Christian leaders after the apostles died, wrote about John, whom he had known. He said that John at the end of his life couldn't walk anymore or even sit upright. He would be brought into Christian assemblies on a stretcher by his friends. He would prop himself up on one elbow and whisper to the assembly, "Little children, love one another," and lie back down. The next time they met, he would do exactly the same thing. Finally someone objected and said, "We've heard that. It's too simple. What further teaching can you give us, what other emphasis can you bring?" John's answer to those who objected was this: "I say, 'Love one another' because it is the Lord's command, and if this is all you do, it is enough."

If you love one another because it is the Lord's command, from the heart, it means that you have settled all the other issues. It means you are walking in the light, confessing your sins, having fellowship with one another, not lying anymore. It means you have gotten over the problem of defending yourself and have acknowledged who you are and who Christ is. You have bowed the knee before him; you are obeying your commander. If all that is true, then it is enough. "Love one another" is a marvelous test of whether we have decided that Jesus is in fact in charge, and whether in fact we are willing to tell the truth.

I would leave us with this challenge: Let the Spirit of God bring to your mind's eye some group, family, or individual; someone you might well have ignored. Think of some Christian brother or sister you need to love because the Lord says to love them, even though perhaps you're not attracted to them and expect nothing in return. It may very well even be risky-it may cost you something to love them, perhaps humiliate you or make you vulnerable. But as John says in verse 10, "Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble." It won't come out ruinous or awful. And "...the darkness is passing and the true light is shining." As we obey the Lord even with risky love, instead of stumbling we'll find that we are honored by him, and all the things we really hope for become more and more ours. We'll find ourselves walking the way Jesus did.

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