

**“PRACTICING THE TRUTH”**

We began our study of 1 John last week by noting that its overall theme is the assurance of salvation. John wrote this letter because of his concerns about the false teachers who were afflicting the churches to which he was writing. And he responds to this false teaching by setting forth the tests of true Christianity. This explains John's repeated use of the phrase “If we say” in the passage we have just read. It was the false teachers who were saying the things that John refutes here. They claimed to be Christians, but John can say with confidence that they are not. This passage shows us that the test of a person's profession of faith in Christ is whether his beliefs and behavior are consistent with the apostolic message. The person who professes to be a Christian but lives in a manner that contradicts the gospel message is no true Christian. *True Christians put the truth that they profess into practice. Real Christians practice the truth.*

*Our passage begins with John proclaiming the message that he heard from Christ: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”* In the Bible, “light” is often used as a metaphor for God's truth and holiness, and this is clearly what John has in mind here. There is no darkness, no falsehood or impurity, in the God who is light. But we might wonder why John would choose to sum up the apostolic message in this way. We might expect him to say something about the way of salvation, something like what we find at the end of his Gospel, where he says that his purpose in writing was “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” [Jn. 20:31] But in our text John sums up his message by saying that “God

is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” He does this because he is confronting the ideas that were being promoted by the false teachers. These heretics claimed to be in fellowship with God, but they were living in a manner that was inconsistent with God’s character. They were saying things about themselves that were in direct contradiction to what God says in his Word. John has to confront this, lest the Christians in these churches be led astray by a false gospel. This shows us that God’s light, his revelation of his truth and holiness, is the standard that we need to use to discern immorality and error. God hates the deeds of darkness, and the light of his truth exposes them for what they are. Those who live in fellowship with God need to allow his light to shine on all falsehood and evil.

After setting forth this foundational truth that God is light, John moves on to point out two ways in which Christians need to put this truth into practice. And the first thing that he says is that *genuine believers put this truth into practice by seeking to live holy lives*. Those who claim to have fellowship with God but walk in the darkness are not practicing the truth. To walk in the darkness is to live in sin. John is talking about the error of antinomianism. This is the error that says that it is possible to enjoy a relationship with God while continuing to live in habitual sin and error. Now do not misunderstand this. John is not saying that Christians can live sinless lives. He clearly refutes that notion in verses 8-10, as we will see in a few moments. Sin continues to reside within Christians after we are born again. Our warfare against indwelling sin will continue for as long as we live in this present life. However, as theologian John Murray once put it, “It is one

thing for sin to live in us: it is another for us to live in sin.” [*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 145] Christians no longer live in sin because sin is no longer our master. To walk in the darkness is to place yourself back under the dominion of sin.

Christians practice the truth by walking in the light. Even though we still sin, we want to be holy. The fact that we continue to sin is our greatest sorrow in this life. We look to the Lord and we ask him to make us holy. This is a vital mark of true Christianity. A person who is still in love with his sin, a person who does not hate his sin, such a person has no reason to be confident of his salvation. Yet there are many who seem to think that they can be Christians and still love their sin. Listen to how this way of thinking is confronted by the great Puritan Walter Marshall:

“Great multitudes of ignorant people, that live under the gospel, harden their hearts in sin, and ruin their souls forever, by trusting in Christ for such an imaginary salvation, as consisteth not at all in holiness, but only in forgiveness of sin, and deliverance from everlasting torments. They [want to] be free from the punishment due to sin; but they [want to] love their lusts so well, that they hate holiness, and would not be saved from the service of sin...[N]one do or can trust on Christ for true salvation, except they trust on him for holiness: neither do they heartily desire true salvation, if they do not desire to be made holy and righteous in their hearts and lives. If ever God and Christ give you salvation, holiness will be one part of it” [*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 99-100]

Do you see Marshall's point? Jesus only promises to be the Savior of those who want to turn away from iniquity. The gospel is a summons to "repent and believe." True conversion involves turning away from one way of life that we might be given the strength to live another kind of life.

What does walking in the light look like? Much could be said about it. It is the habit of agreeing with what God reveals in his Word. It means hating what God hates and loving what God loves. The holy person endeavors to shun every known sin, and to keep every known commandment. While he knows that his salvation is not in any way based upon his efforts, his gratitude causes him to strive to be perfect, as his heavenly Father is perfect. As John will say in chapter 2, the holy person seeks to walk as Jesus walked. He will cultivate the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience, self-control, mercy, and, above all, love. He will walk in the fear of the Lord. He will be a spiritually-minded man. In the words of J.C. Ryle,

"He will not neglect the business of the life that now is; but the first place in his mind and thoughts will be given to the life to come. He will aim to live like one whose treasure is in heaven, and to pass through this world like a stranger and pilgrim traveling to his home. To commune with God in prayer, in the Bible, and in the assembly of His people – these things will be the holy man's chiefest enjoyments." [*Holiness*, 37]

This is the first thing that this passage has to say about practicing the truth. God's true children walk in his light, not in darkness.

The next point is that *genuine believers put the truth into practice by always facing up to their sin and confessing it*. This might seem to contradict the first point, but it is the clear teaching of Scripture. While God's people are called to be holy, we are also called to confess our sin. This is because, as Martin Luther famously said, Christians are simultaneously righteous and sinful. We are at the same time saints and sinners. By virtue of the cleansing blood of Christ, applied to us by faith, we are righteous in God's sight. And in Christ we have been given a new nature. We have been born again, raised with Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit. Yet we continue to have a sinful nature as well. This is why John speaks in the present tense in verse 8. He uses the verb "have," not "had." We have to admit that we *have* sin, not merely that we *had* sin at some point in our past. This is an essential part of practicing the truth. God is perfect in his holiness. There is absolutely no darkness in him. But it is not so with us, not even with the most devout Christian on the face of this earth. And for this reason those who truly live in fellowship with the God who is light will not protest their innocence. They will face up to their sin and confess it.

John says that the person who denies his sinfulness is only deceiving himself. This is the deceitfulness of our sin. In one sense it is impossible for us to deny the fact that we sin. But at the same time it is easy for us to always blame someone or something else for

the sins that we commit. And this is something that we are seeing more and more in our culture, as sinful behavior is typically explained away by appealing to psychological, physiological, or societal causes. For example, when a prominent figure is caught in a situation in which his immoral lifestyle is made public, what do people say? They often say that he needs help. He needs counseling. He needs to learn how to make better decisions. Perhaps he even needs to take the right kind of medicine to fix his faulty brain chemistry. These are the kinds of things we often hear people say in response to blatant immorality. But what we need to see is that these ways of responding to sinful behavior are actually ways of denying our sinfulness. They allow us to blame our sin on something that is beyond our control. Now this is not to deny that counseling and medication can at times be helpful to people. It is only to say that we must not lose sight of the fact that the root cause of all of our immoral behavior is our sinful heart. The person who cannot say this is not taking responsibility for his sin. He is deceiving himself.

We have to confess our sins if we want to be forgiven of them. And far from being depressing, this is what makes the Christian faith so glorious. The gospel faces up to the reality of sin and provides the only true cure for it. As John Stott puts it,

“Christianity is the only religion which, by emphasizing that God is light, first insists on taking sin seriously and then offers a satisfying moral solution to the problem of sin. The way to have fellowship with a God who is light is not to

deny the fact or effects of sin, but to confess ours sins and thankfully appropriate God's provision for our cleansing." [79]

If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. He is faithful to his covenant promise, the promise in which he said he would forgive his people's iniquity and remember their sin no more. And he is just in extending this forgiveness, because Jesus Christ has met all the requirements of the law on our behalf and has paid the penalty that our sins deserve.

When we live in fellowship with the God of light, his light exposes the darkness that still resides in our hearts. This is why an essential aspect of practicing the truth is regularly confessing your sins to the Lord. We need daily forgiveness, because we commit new sins each and every day. To deny this is to deny the Word of God. It is to call God, the one in whom there is no darkness at all, a liar. The Scriptures tell us that "there is no one who does not sin" [1 Kgs. 8:46], that "there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins" [Eccl. 7:20], that "None is righteous, no, not one" [Rom. 3:10]. The person who will not acknowledge his sinfulness, the person who will not confess his particular sins, is a person has not truly received the gospel.

God is light, and his holy character has two essential implications for the lives of those who profess to live in fellowship with him. There are two ways in which the Christian needs practice the truth. On the one hand, he must strive to live a holy life. He

is to be ruthless in his battle against sin and relentless in his pursuit of holiness. J.

Gresham Machen puts it this way:

“[A]lthough sin is actually found in Christians it does not belong there; it is never to be acquiesced in for one single moment, but is to be treated as a terrible anomaly that simply ought not to be.” [*What Is Faith?*, 207]

Yet even as he strives to be holy, the Christian must never forget that it is only in Christ, never in himself, that he will find the holiness that he so desires. In the words of J.C.

Ryle:

“Would you be holy? Would you become a new creature? Then you must begin with Christ. You will do just nothing at all, and make no progress till you feel your sin and weakness, and flee to Him. He is the root and beginning of all holiness, and the way to be holy is to come to Him by faith and be joined to Him. Christ is not wisdom and righteousness only to His people, but sanctification also...Do you want to attain holiness? Do you feel this day a real hearty desire to be holy?...Then go to Christ...Holiness comes from Christ. It is the result of vital union with Him. It is the fruit of being a living branch of the true Vine.” [*Holiness*, 48]

Jesus Christ is the root and source of all holiness. And this remains just as true after you become a Christian as it was beforehand. Do not pull up your bootstraps and try to walk in the light by your own strength. That is what the apostle Paul described as trying to be perfected by the flesh, by human effort. And as Paul makes very clear, it does not work. And the reason why it does not work is because of what John tells us in this passage. We still have sin. We still commit sin. Do not try to deny this. That is not the way to walk in the light. That is not the way to practice the truth. To minimize sin is to minimize Christ, who died for our sins. Own up to your sin. Confess your sins to the Lord. Do it each and every day. Go to Christ for forgiveness and for strength. Abide in him in this way, and he will abide in you and cause you to bear much fruit.