

Holiness matters

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[0 : 0 0] can help us to test our own view of sin. And I think that's always something that's important for us to consider. My attention was drawn this week to a relatively recent Barna Institute survey, so that's a group that often kind of do surveys about sort of Christian belief. And this was a survey done within Christian churches that revealed some striking, alarming things. Only 44% of those who were surveyed, for example, believed that Jesus lived a perfectly sinless life.

52% believed it was possible to earn one's salvation by good works, says people, within churches. And only 35% believed that God wants His people to be holy, that growing in holiness is something that matters. What do those statistics reveal? Well, they certainly reveal error and confusion about the person and work of Jesus. It also, in turn, reveals confusion about the reality of sin, which in turn shows confusion about the truth that God's grace is and will always be the only basis for the hope of salvation. But also, it reveals to us that the warnings of John's letter are warnings that God's people always need to hear. So, the situation facing John, we thought about this a little bit last week, he is confronting head-on some false teaching. There were some people in first century Ephesus who were separating Jesus so that they said He was not fully God and fully man.

And one of the truths, the teachings that they were bringing related to that is that because the spirit is more significant than the body and that Jesus never took on a body, they were teaching what we do in and with our bodies actually doesn't matter. That holiness in life doesn't matter, that it's about some kind of spirit connection. So, we come to this section of John's letter, and what we're going to hear is him recording for us three false slogans that were being produced by these false teachers, wrong answers to the problem of sin. And he's going to invite us to test our own view of sin against a key statement, test their teaching against a key statement also, that God is light in him that is no darkness. And then we're also going to discover from John God's response, God's answer to the very real problem of sin in our lives, as we'll discover it centers on Jesus, who last week we encountered as the Word of Life. But let's begin here in verse 5 with the test that John invites us to apply. So, verse 5, this is the message we have heard from him and declare to you, God is light, in him there is no darkness at all. So, John is bringing Jesus' message about God to the church. And in summary, he says this is what Jesus would want us to know about God, God is light. Think about the property of light. Light is always shining, it is always revealing. And when applied to God, it's saying that God is always shining, revealing his purity, his holiness, his majesty, his perfection. And that's the consistent message of the Bible. The book of Leviticus, we hear God say, be holy because I am holy.

In the prophet Habakkuk, he says, your eyes, speaking of God, are too pure to look on evil.

We could go to so many places and we would discover this God who is holy is other than us, set apart from us. There's no contamination or impurity with God. And that has implications then for how we live. Think about what Bob read for us from John chapter 3, that invitation to come to Jesus to find life and to walk in the light. One of the problems was people were choosing darkness instead of light. Later in John chapter 12, Jesus would say, walk in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of the light. It's an interesting idea. We become what we behold.

[5 : 03] You'll look to Jesus as the one who is light and we will become more like him. But John is saying to us, God is light, there is no darkness in God whatsoever. To consider God is to consider his intense, perfect glory and beauty. John says, this is the message that we heard from Jesus. We're declaring to you. Jesus, who we know never compromised on sin. Jesus who came as the only answer to sin.

And so as John is listening to false teaching, he wants the readers of his day and every day to understand that it is foolish, indeed it is dangerous, to imagine I can have fellowship with a God who is perfect light, but not seek to walk in the light of his truth and his holiness.

John is going to make plain that it's a denial of God's truth also to say that any Christian or any church will not struggle with sin, will not need cleansing from Christ. And one of the false teachings is that we've moved beyond that. We've reached a higher level. We've reached perfect. No, we will always struggle with sin. We always need cleansing. And John's desire as he sets about with this statement and then approaching these errors is to see a church who's walking in the light.

That's the language of verse 7. 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. This is what he wants for us, to be a church who are walking in the light together. We're allowing God's glory and truth and God's grace to shine on us, causing us to be honest about sin and causing us to delight in God's grace, as the good news of the Lord Jesus also shines in the gospel. Because God is light and there's no darkness in him. And remember, John has already told us that Jesus is fully God. So Jesus is light and there's no darkness in him. He is the one who came to shine the light of God's glory and grace in the world. Jesus is the one who came to take and to endure the darkness of sin and its judgment so that we can take our sin into the light, so that we can live in the light, so we can have fellowship with God.

And so we need to be clear on the identity of Jesus and we need to be clear about the reality of sin. And that's why he takes us to these lies that we need to reject from false teachings. So in verses 6 and 10, we're going to see three of them. But even before we get back into our text, I think we've seen again this week that whenever there are significant debates going on, and it's just a feature of news reporting nowadays that we'll hear these fact-checking claims and statements being made. Is that thing that has just been reported, can it be verified? Are there statistics to back it up? Are there time-stamped photographs that give proof of what's being reported on? And so John wants to fact-check some slogans from these false teachers and to check them against what's true of God. If God is light, does what they say about sin really stack up? And we'll see that it doesn't, and so we must reject them as error. So there's three slogans. Here is the first one. It's here in verse 6. The first slogan of these false teachers, we deny that sin breaks our fellowship with God. If we claim to have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But there were a group of false teachers saying, this body, it's just like an envelope. The stuff that matters is what's inside.

[9 : 27] What we do with our bodies and our body really doesn't matter. We can claim a pure spiritual connection with God regardless of our behavior. That what we do in life is not going to affect the fact that we can have fellowship with God. John says, it's nonsense. If we are walking in darkness, and the imagery of walking, this is our habit, this is our pattern. If our direction of travel is to go against the God who is light, it is impossible to still enjoy fellowship with God.

It is impossible, and we know this, for light and dark to mix. It is impossible to imagine we can have fellowship with the God of perfect light and holiness if we are not being honest and dealing with our sin.

Again, we hear that all through Scripture. Psalm 5 verse 4, you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness. That's really straightforward. Psalms 66, a personal reflection. If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. Isaiah 59, here's what the prophet says.

Your iniquities have separated you from your God. Your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear. So, if we find ourselves saying, I don't need to go to the cross for cleansing.

I don't need to confess sin. If we say to ourselves, I don't need to worry about personal holiness. If I believe that God's grace gives me a free pass to act however I want, John would say to us, we're believing a lie. We're out of fellowship with God, and we're out of touch with reality.

[11 : 30] That's the first slogan and John's response. Here's the second one. This is another thing the false teachers were saying. They were saying, we deny that sin exists in our nature. Verse 8, if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Think about that. Even today, when the sun was shining, one thing that we know about the light, when it shines, it exposes. You clean your windows, the sun shines, and you see the smears that you hoped weren't there. The sun shines, and the dust on your TV screen dances before your very eyes.

And that light of God that shines and exposes shines a light on the sin, the impurity, the imperfections in our hearts and in our lives.

And so the teaching of these false teachers is clearly error, as they claim sin is no longer a problem to us. We have gained a victory over it. John says, to think like that is to lie to ourselves and to not have the truth. Even to think about some of the texts that we have considered recently in church. To go back to the imagery of Genesis 4, God very clearly says to Cain, sin is like a wild animal. It's like a predator. It crouches. It's ready to attack. If we say, there's no sin in me, I don't have a problem with sin, we are already doomed. Isaiah 6. Think about the prophet's response as he was exposed to the reality of God's majesty and holiness. It's not, here is one in an equal measure with me. It's, woe is me, I am undone. Or the testimony of the apostle Paul in Romans 7, speaking of that ongoing war within. And remember, he's an apostle. But he would testify, what I want to do,

I don't do. What I hate to do, because I know it's wrong, I do. Who will rescue me? Who will deliver me? Think about Jesus giving us the Lord's Prayer, encouraging us to pray, forgive us our sins, and lead us not into temptation. It is foolish, it is dangerous to deny that sin exists in our nature.

[14 : 21] And actually, the real experience of mature believers runs contrary to this as well. That the more that we are exposed to the reality of who God is, that the more we understand of God's character, of His glory, of His holiness, the more we begin to see the extent of God's love in contrast to our own lack of love, mature believers would testify often to being more aware of personal sin as the years go by. To deny then that we battle sin in our nature is a dangerous error. Because again, think about that practically. If I think my sin is not a problem, I'm not going to go to Jesus for cleansing. Or I'm not going to ask the Spirit to help me to resist.

And we would miss the promise and the assurance of verse 9. If we confess our sins, instead of claiming to be without sin, He is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. There's a wonderful promise, a wonderful pardon that we will miss out if we deny the reality of ongoing sin.

There's a third slogan in here, a third error of the false teachers. We deny that sin is seen in our lives. Listen to how John frames it in verse 10.

If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar. We make God out to be a liar, and His Word is not in us. For John, this is the worst. This is the worst lie, is to accuse God of lying if we claim, I am perfect. I don't have any form of sin problem.

What makes this so serious? Well, it simply goes against what God reveals in His Word. Isaiah 53 is a wonderful promise of the gospel, but it speaks to the universal reality of sin. We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. Or Psalm 14, all have turned away, all have become corrupt. There is no one who does good. To claim we have not sinned makes the gospel of no value, makes God's Word out to be a lie. Because the gospel says that sin is so serious a thing, that nothing less than the sacrificial death of the Son of God could forgive it.

[17 : 23] But they say, I don't sin. For I don't need Jesus. I've reached perfection by myself. How we think about sin matters because it will have implications for how we think about Jesus and how we respond to the gospel. There's lots of wonderful stories told about Spurgeon, a 19th century preacher down in London. Here is one of them. Spurgeon was having dinner with a man who over the course of that time was clearly showing evidence of believing that theology that claimed that he had now reached that higher level of perfection. He was done with the battle with sin.

And Spurgeon's wonderful response was to throw a glass of water in his face, at which point the man had a rather angry reaction, revealing that sin was still lurking.

As Spurgeon put it, the old man in you is not dead. He simply fainted and could be revived with a cup of water. John warns us. We can lie to ourselves about sin. And we lie to ourselves about sin when we take it lightly.

When we say, well, I am saved by grace, so how I live now doesn't matter. We take sin lightly and we lie about it when we redefine it to make it seem and sound more acceptable.

When we minimize it. When we turn a blind eye and allow certain sins to become, to use Jerry Bridges' phrase, respectable sin. And that's why we need to take our view of sin and apply it to that test. God is light, no darkness in him.

[19 : 23] He is pure, shining holiness. And John wants to expose their wrong thinking.

So that, because he's a pastor and he cares, he wants his readers then and now to understand the darkness of sin.

The danger of not dealing with sin. So that we would understand our desperate need, our ongoing need of the gospel of the Lord Jesus and the purifying that he brings.

So that takes us, thirdly, to the true answer that we need. Okay, so we've said this. Here's John's statement. God is light.

God is pure and holy. And he's making clear by rejecting false teaching that we are not pure and holy, that we do sin. But he says this as well.

[20 : 28] We are called to live in the light. And we're invited into fellowship with God. And we should be asking ourselves, well, how is that possible?

God is perfectly holy and we are not. Light and dark cannot mix. So how can this be? God is perfectly and we should be the answer The answer comes not by trying to explain away sin.

The answer comes not by lowering the bar of God's holiness. Our response isn't to hide away in the darkness, but it's to recognize God's provision.

It's to understand that God's answer to the problem of sin is His Son, the Lord Jesus. The Word of life and the light of the world. And so at the beginning of chapter 2, Pastor John wants to do two things for us.

First of all, he wants to strike the right balance. Have a look at verse 1. He holds these two statements in a kind of a tension. So he says, first of all, I write this to you so that you will not sin.

[21 : 47] So John never wants the church to take sin too lightly. He says, here's my goal that you do not sin. That's the direction he wants our life to be heading in.

Okay? We know that that will only be true for us in glory, but it still sets the direction of travel for the Christian life. That we are pursuing holiness.

We are pursuing obedience. So he wants to make clear that we don't take sin lightly, but then as a pastor, he doesn't want to be too severe also.

Because immediately after, he says, but if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ. So he says, if we do sin, recognize this, rest in this, trust in this, God has graciously provided the answer to the problem of sin.

And this is our good news. Having considered the bad news, the reality that actually we do have a sin problem, John then turns to give us gospel. That God has provided Jesus as the answer to our sin problem.

[22 : 56] And this is good news because it means we can be honest. We don't need to try and hide our sin to make ourselves look or feel better than we are. We're not invited to try and cover over our sin or to try and turn over a new leaf.

We're not to try and fix it ourselves because we simply cannot. Instead, we are to look to Jesus and trust in Jesus. And to help us with that, he gives us three wonderful truths about Jesus.

In quick succession, and we need them all, and it's a wonderful picture. Here's the first wonderful truth about Jesus. He is our advocate.

If anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous one. So we're taken into the courtroom. Here is our advocate, Jesus.

He comes alongside us to plead our case. He mediates for us. He speaks to the Father on behalf of his people.

[23 : 59] And remember who Jesus is. He is the God-man. So having worked for us on the earth, John is saying, Jesus now continues to work for us in heaven, pleading our case on the basis of his perfect, completed work.

Claiming his all-sufficient merit as the basis why people with faith should be accepted. And John wants to stress how reliable Jesus is.

In a law court, if we ever find ourselves in trouble with the law, doubtless we will want the very best person to represent us if we are to get the verdict that we desire.

And so John wants to tell us who Jesus is, this advocate for his people, for those who trust him. Notice how he describes Jesus. So he is our advocate.

Secondly, he is the righteous one. See that there at the end of verse one? We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous one.

[25 : 07] And notice that John calls him Jesus Christ, wants to keep reminding us he is fully God, he is fully man. This is the one who has been anointed to be God's appointed Savior.

And as fully God and fully man, he is righteous in his being. God is righteous, therefore Jesus is righteous. He is the standard of perfection, and he never shifts from that line and that standard.

And you can read the Gospels and you meet one who is sinlessly perfect, righteous in all his ways, in all his words. He was righteous in his being, he was righteous in his life, always doing the Father's will, always keeping the Father's command.

His life given as a perfect, righteous sacrifice. And again, it reminds us that getting the identity of Jesus right matters.

Those 44% of people polled who didn't believe Jesus was sinlessly perfect, they can have no assurance that Jesus is the basis for their salvation.

[26 : 17] We need to know that he is the sinless Son of God, that he is the righteous one, and as such, he is perfectly qualified to be God's answer to the sin problem and to be the one who is the perfect mediator.

As God, he represents God to us. As man, he represents us before God. But John's not finished describing Jesus as the true answer we need.

He is our advocate, he is the righteous one, but he is also our sacrifice. Look at verse 2, he is the atoning sacrifice, the word there is literally propitiation, for our sins, not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world.

So this is our advocate, and he is righteous, and he is also our sacrifice. So the basis for his plea as our advocate, when we sin, what's our hope?

Is that Jesus, our righteous one, has completed God's plan of salvation by way of offering himself as a perfect sacrifice.

[27 : 32] We believe and trust that the judgment that should fall on us, the wrath of God that we deserve, has been diverted, been turned away from us, and it's fallen on the Son of God instead of on us.

We believe and trust that in Jesus our sin is paid for. The substitute has taken the penalty for law-breaking. That as he says in verse 7, the blood of Jesus purifies from all sin.

The effect of Jesus' cross work is that the stain of sin is cleansed for those who have him as our righteous advocate, who trust him as our sacrifice dealing with our sin.

And so John presents this statement about Jesus inviting the church, inviting us to think, isn't Jesus a better answer to the problem of sin than denying it?

Than being overconfident about our ability to overcome it? Isn't this a better answer than rejecting what is clearly true because we see it and we experience it and we feel sin's sadness and effects in our lives?

[28 : 56] It's the gospel. This is better. This is good news. It reveals how deep God's love is, how deep his grace is truly. God sees everything.

God sees everything about us. God sees the sins that we try and hide from ourselves, the sins that we seek to hide from others and yet, when we are in Christ Jesus, he loves us.

And because the penalty has been taken and because the righteous one has given himself, God can look at us and be as pleased with us as he is with his son, Jesus.

When we are in Jesus, we can walk in fellowship with our God. The blood of Jesus really does cleanse us from our sins.

And so the promise of verse 7 is ours. If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another. And remember, John has already said to have fellowship with one another.

[30 : 07] The foundation of that is having fellowship with God. So we can walk in the light, the light of truth. That for a local church, for a body of believers, we can be a fellowship honest about sin and honest about grace as we enjoy fellowship with the living God.

And notice how John closes. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

What is John saying about Jesus there? He is saying that because Jesus is the eternal Son of God, His sacrifice has eternal virtue and value so it is a sacrifice that is sufficient for the whole world.

John is not saying that everybody in the world is going to be saved regardless of their response to Jesus but he is saying Jesus is a Savior big enough, great enough for everyone.

So we can confidently share the gospel with anybody that we meet. We can say to them believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved and your sin will be forgiven.

[31 : 30] So the truth about Jesus the truth about sin the truth about salvation actually then fuels our mission gives us confidence in sharing the gospel.

In the first century there were voices beginning to appear even within the church saying sin is no big deal. In the 21st century there are still plenty of voices even within the church saying sin is no big deal.

That's primitive we're beyond all that. Holiness is optional. To believe that is to believe the lie. What we need is God's truth that holiness does matter.

It matters to God it matters for our lives and because that is true the gospel is good news. It is God's real answer to our real problem and when we believe it that all our hope of forgiveness and being right with God rests in the Lord Jesus and his finished work then it gives us freedom.

It gives us freedom to confess our sin with that assurance that we will be forgiven. It gives us the freedom even to communicate hard truths with a sense of hope hope.

[32 : 58] We can speak to people about the serious nature of sin and invite them to trust in Jesus with hope because the gospel is true and we have freedom as God's people to celebrate God's grace as we find it in the Lord Jesus.

Let's pray together. Lord God we thank you that we come before the God who is light that there is no darkness in you whatsoever that you have not will not cannot sin to sense