

Focus on obedience

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[0 : 00] I'll remind you what we looked at a little bit last week when John tells us why he's written this letter. In fact, he gives several reasons.

! But I think perhaps the key reason you could say that John has written his letter is this one I put on the slide here, which is in chapter 5, verse 13.

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. In other words, how can John's readers, hearers, how can he be sure that they have eternal life?

And remember that John also warns us against the scammers, the cowboy builders, because he says, I'm writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.

That's 1 John 2, verse 26, which we'll probably look at next time, not next week as in July, but next session. And in order that we might know that we have eternal life, John gives us these three tests of what we might call true Christianity.

[1 : 43] So, for instance, he talks about obedience in 1 John 2, verse 4. This is what we're going to look at shortly. And he tells us about love.

Well, all the way through, John is always on about love. It's his favourite topic. But, for instance, in part of what we read in 1 John 2, 9 to 10.

And also, the third test is one of the truth, the doctrinal truth, as we might say, the true gospel. And he talks about that, for instance, in chapter 2, verses 21 to 23.

But, as I pointed out last week, you can't really separate these out. In John's thinking, they're always plaited together. They're always twisted together.

And though you might focus on one, the others always come in as well. And we'll certainly find that as we look at this passage.

[2 : 46] I think in this passage that we're turning to, the focus is on obedience. So, if you like, if you don't like the word obedience, say, how can we live avoiding sin?

How can we live as we should? How can we walk as Jesus walked? But, as I say, you can't separate them out. You find that all these three things are always woven together.

So, let's look at this passage. It's quite a long passage, quite a complex passage. But I do think it does have one basic theme. And so it makes sense to do it all together.

And I'd like to look at it, break it down into four sub-passages, as I've put up on the screen there. The first one is the issue of sin.

How do we, what do we do about sin? And that's really from one verse, chapter one, verse six, to chapter two, verse six. And then from chapter two, verses seven to nine, a shorter passage.

[3 : 49] How do, are you clear where it is you're going? If you're going to walk as Jesus did, it's a good idea to know where you're going. And then from chapter two, twelve to fourteen, are you actually getting anywhere?

In other words, are you actually making any progress in your journey? And then finally, is your heart set on arriving? Do you really want to get anywhere?

And I think, sorry, this is why I think it is one continuous argument, although it's various sections. He's trying to tell us how we can not sin.

He said, I'm writing to you because I don't want you to sin, but how can we do that? So let's start then. This is the longest section. If you feel it's getting a bit long, this is the longest section by a long chalk, this first one.

We'll look at first from one, chapter one, verse six, through to chapter two, verse six. And I'd like to point out to you that this is a chiasm, because if you don't see that, the structure may seem a little odd.

[5 : 00] Now, I do apologise. I hope you can read that. To get it on at all, I had to use a fairly small font, and obviously I couldn't. It's too long to put the whole thing out, so I've had to paraphrase it a bit.

But I hope that this does make clear to you the structure. So in chapter one, verse six, he talks about walking, and he says, if we walk in the darkness, we're living a lie, so let's walk in the light. And then in verse seven, he says, but if we walk in the light, Jesus' blood purifies us. And then in verse eight, if we claim to be sinless, then we're actually living a lie.

And at the centre of the chiasm, which in this sort of structure is always the most important part, we find that if we confess, he is faithful and just to forgive and purify sins.

That's verse nine of chapter two, sorry, chapter one. And then the chiasm unwinds again. If we claim not to have sinned, we make God a liar and live that lie.

[6 : 10] In verse 10, we shouldn't sin, but if we do, there's an advocate and an atonement. Chapter two, verses one to two. And then, John goes back to where he started.

If we're disobedient, we're living a lie. So we need to walk in the light, he said at the beginning. Now he says to walk as Jesus did. And that's in chapter two, verses three to six.

So you can see the structure there and how it all focuses in on this central verse that God is faithful and just to forgive our sins. So let's see if we can unpack John's argument here a bit.

So the starting point is that we should not sin, and yet, of course, we do. And this paradox lies at the heart of the Christian life.

How can we walk in the light in obedience to God's command when we're naturally sinful? And if we don't walk in the light, we have no fellowship with him, as John tells us, him being God here, of course.

[7 : 18] If we don't walk in the light, we can have no fellowship with God. God, one verse six. So how can we deal with that? Or can it be dealt with?

Obviously, is the correct response just to despair and say, oh, well, it's a nice thought, but it ain't going to work. But no, John says there is a solution to this problem.

But first of all, he lists a couple of wrong answers. We could just go into denial in verse eight. And we could say that we are without sin.

We can do that in various ways. We can claim to be immune from sin. We can claim that sin doesn't matter. We can claim the Gnostic idea that we're now spiritual beings and that sin is a body thing. And so it really doesn't matter what we do in our bodies. It has no effect on our fellowship with God. Or in verse 10, we don't necessarily claim to be immune from sin.

[8 : 29] We simply claim that we haven't done it. But if we make any claim like that, John tells us that that's called God a liar because God has said that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

And it's to exclude God's word from our lives. Now, somewhat bizarrely, you may be aware that some verses in John have actually been used to justify some perfectionist teaching, the view that it's possible to live without sin, at least for believers, if you reach some higher spiritual plateau.

But how anybody can claim that when John quite clearly says if we claim we don't sin, we make God a liar, is quite beyond me. Clearly, John is not teaching anything like that at all.

And in fact, what he's saying is to walk in the light, is to bring our sins under God's light as his word and to look at his word is it shows us what we really like.

Because we might have gone into denial if we just didn't look too hard. But when we look at God's word, he shows us what we really like. And then we will begin to turn away from sin, which is what John wants us to do.

[9 : 55] But in fact, we might despair because our fellowship with God is already broken. So is it worth the effort? But at the center here, we have God's solution to this problem.

There is a sacrifice in verse 7. There is an atonement and a counsel for the defense. Chapter 2, verses 1 and 2.

And at the center here of the chiasm, we have that hub, the crucial part. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

So let's look at this central verse here. What does he actually say? First of all, notice it's conditional. If we confess our sins, if we go around in some sort of denial, saying we haven't sinned, we don't sin, then it doesn't apply to us.

But if we confess our sins, he's faithful and just to forgive us our sins. And that's quite a remarkable claim, actually.

[11:12] He doesn't just say, if we do that, God will say, oh well, never mind, it's all right. Try again, do better next time. That's not what he says. He says that if we confess our sins, he is both faithful and just to forgive us our sins.

What's faithful? Why is he faithful? Because he keeps his covenant promise to his people. Remember, the word says that even if we are faithless, he is faithful because he cannot deny himself.

He keeps faith with his people because he said that he will bring them through, bring them through to the promised land. And that it says he's also just and that seems even more strange, doesn't it? So, if you turn up in court and say, yeah, I'm sorry, your honour, I did it. No, I'm guilty. Then, is the judge just in saying, oh, well, okay, I'll let you off then.

Of course he's not. But, it says here that he is just to forgive our sins. Why is that? Because the penalty of sin has already been paid.

[12:37] The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from our sin. The penalty is paid and the power of sin is itself weakened so that we should do better next time around.

And so, we need to avoid both errors. First of all, the error that says that we have no sin but also the error that says that we cannot make progress in holiness.

The top lady puts it in his hymn, Rock of Ages, be of sin the double cure. Cleanse me from its guilt and power. I'm going to sing that hymn at the end for that reason.

It makes the point very clearly there. So, we're to walk as Jesus did but we don't have to work it out for ourselves.

After all, being holy just means being set apart, being different and you can be different in all sorts of ways. Some forms of holiness are harsh and fanatical, aren't they?

[13:40] We see that in some forms of religion, I won't name names perhaps, but where there's no forgiveness there, just fanaticism, just standing up and saying I'm right and the rest of you are wrong.

And some forms of holiness are so heavenly-minded as to be no earthly use, aren't they? People just wander around in a sort of spiritual daze talking to God all the time and, you know, it's a wonder they don't get run over because they're not aware of what's going on around them.

But, we don't have to sort of guess what form of holiness it is that God requires because he was an example to follow, that of Jesus himself.

And Jesus was the one who campaigned, didn't he, for the highest moral standards. We've been looking at what he said about divorce and murder and things like that. And yet, this one who campaigned for the highest moral standards was friends with at least two women of very dubious reputation.

He was friends with two tax collectors who were probably dishonest and certainly would have been Roman collaborators. not very respectable people.

[15:11] His brand of holiness, he was never drunk or gluttonous and yet he liked dinner parties, at least he seemed to go to a lot of them. And he was concerned when a wedding party ran out of wine that the party would be spoiled.

that's the sort of holiness that Jesus requires when we walk as he walks that spreads the love of God around us as Phil was just praying.

It doesn't just apply as we meet here but it spills out to those around. So, we're to walk as Jesus walks and that raises the question then are you clear where you're going?

Chapter 2 verses 7 to 9 Have you got the right map?

I suppose nowadays I should ask have you got your sat now tuned in but I won't say that. Have you got the right map in verses 7 and 8? Turn back.

[16:31] He says have you got the old map the one that you were given at the beginning? It's the gospel that you were preached from the beginning.

That's the root map you need. And yet although it's the old map it's also the new map. It's also thoroughly up to date. It's the new commandment because the commandment is to walk in the light and that's the command they heard from the beginning.

It's not this new fangled gospel that the heretics were preaching. There's always somebody who's prepared to come along with a new gospel and yet that old gospel, that old command is always

new.

They're told to walk in the light. We might ask what John means by the light. In fact, in John's gospel, the light usually refers to Jesus himself. But here, it's perhaps not entirely clear.

It might have something to do with love but the text suggests, the context suggests that perhaps John is talking about gospel truth as the light including its moral implications for purity of life.

[17 : 47] And those who seek God find that the command, yet it's old, it's the message we heard from the beginning, yet it's the command that's always new. Let me read to you from Lamentations.

Don't bother to look it up, I'll just read it out to you. Lamentations of course was written by the prophet Jeremiah. I will remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning, great is your faithfulness. I say to myself the Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for him. The Lord is God to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him.

So Jeremiah remembered the old covenant, the promises that were given to Abraham and to Jacob and to David. And he says that those compassions are not old, they're not something in the past, but they're new every morning and therefore I will have hope.

[19 : 05] so we have a map that's the old map and yet it's a map that is always up to date as the word of God sheds its light on our path.

And one other thing John mentions here, don't travel at night. verse 11, whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness.

He doesn't know where he's going because the darkness has blinded him. John's gospel, we read John 11, 9 to 10, Jesus answered, are there not twelve hours of daylight?

This was when he was questioned about his travel plans. He answered, are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble for he sees by this world's light.

It is when he walks by night that he stumbles for he has no light. But the light of the gospel is already shining around as John tells us here. It's already shining its light on our path so we don't have to stumble in the darkness.

[20 : 21] We can see the way to go. But John reminds us not to travel at night. Wait till you can see where you're going through the light of the gospel and sheds God's light when you walk.

So, okay, those are the travel instructions. Are we actually getting anywhere? Are we making progress?

And we have these in verses 12 verses 12 through to 14. We have this repetitive section here. There is one thing that's not clear in our translations.

There is actually a tense change. The first two verses, three people from 12 through to the end of 13.

Let's get this right way around. in the present tense, the second triplet, the second three are actually in the aorist tense. I'm no Greek scholar but I believe that means something like an event that has a continuing significance, although it may have happened earlier.

[21 : 35] I think that means something like that. English doesn't have a aorist tense so we either have to use the causes problems for translators, but we either have to use the present tense or the perfect tense and the NIV has chosen to use the present tense all the way through.

Some translations use the past tense for the second three. But there is a change of tense and perhaps he's emphasising again that this command is still, the message is both new and old. It's something that you were told in the past and yet it is a message that is also new and up to date. So we get these three categories of people here.

Some commentators including such noteworthies as Luther and Calvin in fact think that the children refer to all believers and that they're divided into two categories the young and the old.

But the contrast with the fathers there seems to me to make that reading a little strange so I think I go with John Stott here. who says that there are actually three categories here.

[22 : 49] Let's make a couple of points. It's clearly not only referring to men. I was going to ask Catherine what the new NIV said whether it uses gender free language there which it does in some cases but whether that's not is clear not only referring to men anyway here it refers to men and women but he does use seem to use male categories here and there were three but his commentators have all agreed and I think it's fairly clear he's not just he's not talking about literal

babies here he's talking about where you are in the spiritual life how far are you along how much progress have you made and it's interesting that in a sense of course you land up where you started do you notice that it's been said many times you can't stand still in the

Christian life if you're not pressing forward then you're sliding backwards but how does it work call we start as newborns with forgiveness coming to know God in the beginning of verse 12 and the end of verse 13 different words actually are used for children in the two different places and if you look at them up in strong which is what Phil puts up on the board all the time actually strong suggests that they are just synonyms but again John Stott suggests actually there might be a difference in the two words that are used in verse 12 the term for children is *technia* and John suggests that might be referred to being John Stott here I don't mean John apostle here John Stott suggests that that might mean being born into a family so the emphasis might be there on being a newborn an infant and you're born into the family of God in verse 13 the term *padia* is used and again

John Stott suggests that might refer to meaning somebody being a trainee adult in other words a child as a pupil somebody who is learning to growing up starting to grow up in the faith but be that as it may he certainly talks about those who have started just started on their spiritual life and how do they start well with two things in verse 12 they start with forgiveness because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name and then in verse 13 C I write to you children because you have known the father so we start on the spiritual life with knowing God and where do we end up well same place actually verse 13 I write to you fathers because you have known him who is from the beginning verse 14 well 14 is the same

I write to you fathers because you have known him who is from the beginning so does that mean we're not actually going anywhere far from it I think it's the same gospel and the same person we know and yet that knowledge has matured just as a husband and wife know each other when they start their marriage but their whole life together is about getting to know each other better isn't it so it is here we start with the excitement of a new love and a new intimacy with God but we progress towards a deeper love and a deeper intimacy it might be less exciting but it's surely far more fulfilling as we begin to learn by experience what God is really like okay so that's where we start and that's where we end but what happens in the middle do we have an easy ride of it do we just get on the bus and get on the cable car and it wafts us up the hill with no effort unfortunately not the path that we take is one of struggle is one of warfare young men and women as they grow in spiritual strength remember he says

I write to you young men in verse 14 he says I write to you young men because you are strong as we grow in spiritual strength we learn and we find in the word of God the resources to overcome the world note that John uses the perfect tense here they have overcome the evil one he doesn't say with a bit of luck he might or if you keep on you know eventually you will he says you have achieved victories they have already achieved victories perhaps here particularly having seen through the deceits of the heretics whatever it is he says they have won significant battles but the war is not over the war goes on they are present tense strong but they continue to grow in strength as the word of God continues to live in them so again as we said before it's not that the battle is ever over not in this world anyway and yet we do make progress we shouldn't think that you know we're just fighting to stay in the same place like the red queen you have to run very hard to stay in the same place well you do but actually as the word of

[28 : 54] God grows in us we do achieve victories! I think we should not pretend otherwise we should be looking for victory in our lives we should be looking as we get to know God better to become more like him and indeed if we're not it does indeed cast doubt on whether we're really walking in the light the war goes on though and then finally John raises the point well of course do you really want to get there there's a story told about that during the second world war the physicist Heisenberg if I remember it correctly I think he was in a neutral country or somewhere for some conference or something I can't remember the exact details but it said he was contacted by allied intelligence because they wanted to know if the Nazis were developing an atom bomb and Heisenberg is said to have replied no one discover something they don't want to discover that's very true isn't it you won't learn to play the piano or the violin unless you really want to unless you put your heart in it because you have to put in the hard work you have to practice you have to get up like an

Olympic athlete when everybody else is still in bed if you want to become a swimmer have to go down to the swimming pool while it's still frosty and you have to put in the laps put in the lengths put in the laps of the track if you're a runner or a cyclist if your heart's not in it you're not going to do it and so John says where is your heart set because true obedience proceeds from love and so this is what he says chapter 2 verse 15 do not love the world or anything in the world if anyone loves the world the love of the father is not in him Jesus said you can't serve God and money you can't serve two masters what's your heart set on is your love for the father or for the deceiver people have pointed!

out that there's apparent contradiction here because we're told in fact in John's gospel chapter 3 that God so loved the world that he gave his own son so how are we not to love the world and yet the term is used in both senses I think in the scriptures here here it's well it's clear what he says he tells us isn't he everything in the world the cravings of sinful man the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has said and does comes from not from the father but from the world we're not to love the world in the sense that we're not to share in its cravings!

and desires do you notice here that the gnostic arguments turned on its head the gnostics were claiming that the desires were for the spiritual and the eternal which would not pass away but John says well no actually your cravings are embedded in this world this base cosmos of unspiritual things in one sense he says yes you gnostics are right in that the things of this world are temporary but we avoid the temptations of this world not by ignoring them but by overcoming them because God did love this world not some other world hypothetical world God did love this world that he sent his only son and so we shouldn't love the world in the sense of!

looking at the cravings of this world lust and the boasting and seeking looking after things because the world in this sense and its desires pass away but the man who does the will of God lives forever so where are our hearts set do we really want to arrive are we going to put in the hours if our hearts are not set on the love of God set your affections on things above so as I said there's a lot going on there but let's summarize what John's argument is and I've tried to summarize it briefly there we battle with sin and yet we always need to come back to Jesus for forgiveness but we do make real progress if the word of God is truly living in us and and if it's not we're not making progress then we need to ask the question is the word of

[33 : 59] God truly living in us and we need to think about that now on the other hand if we claim we've achieved the final victory in this life then we're going to be living a very dangerous lie but only by following Jesus walking as Jesus walked can we know that we're on the right track so I say a lot going on there but something that's a real spiritual benefit to us I thought we would finish by singing that hymn I don't know whether we have a pianist oh we do have a pianist yes that well known hymn of course of Augustus Toplady that says be of sin the double cure save me from its grief its guilt and power 705 block of ages except for me ending ending ending!

ending! ending! ending