

Eyewitness Sermon Series

Forgiven

I John 1:1-2:2

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Today we are beginning a new sermon series based on the book of 1 John. It's a very tiny little book toward the end of the New Testament that is followed by two even tinier letters, 2 and 3 John, that were written to the same community. It was a community of believers that had been founded and instructed by John - the same John who was the brother of James, one of the Twelve, the one known in the Gospel of John as the Beloved Disciple. The author of I John is never named, and while some believe it to have been written by John himself, others believe it is more likely that it was written by a leader in the community who knew and had been instructed by John. One of the claims that the author makes at the very beginning of the book in the text we will read today, is that he is included among the eyewitnesses who saw Jesus. This status was a reminder to the community of his authority and his credibility and that was an important thing to establish because competing teachers with competing ideas had been popping up in the community. It had only been 50-70 years since Jesus had lived, and died, and risen from the dead, but, already, controversies about Jesus's nature, and about what it meant to be a Christian, and about how Christians should live in the world had emerged. The main purpose of I John, was to remind the believers what they had been taught about Jesus so that they would be strong in their faith and not easily swayed or divided by false teachers. There were some particular claims that these teachers were making, and the author of 1 John focuses on refuting those particular claims, and along with that, one theme that comes up again and again is love. For this teacher, love is the defining thing. It defines God - both God's nature and God's activity. It defines Christian character, and it defines Christian relationships and community. At least it is meant to. So, with some understanding of the background and purpose of this letter, let's begin at the beginning. I'll be reading I John 1:1-2:2.

1 We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— 3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with

his Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our[joy may be complete. 5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 7 but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

That is the beginning of I John. The author reminds his readers that what he has to say matches the earliest testimony about Jesus that was proclaimed by those who knew Jesus and had witnessed his resurrection, and, as I said, he includes himself as one of those witnesses. From there he begins to explain what can be known about God through God's revelation of Himself in the person of Jesus, and from there he moves to the subject of human sin and what God has done about sin through Christ. This beginning, both the form and content of it, is similar to the beginning of another book and that book is The Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin. Calvin begins his whole systematic theology by talking about the Knowledge of God, and he explains that we can only really see the truth about ourselves when we see the truth about God. "It is certain that a man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating [God] to scrutinize himself." If we fail to look at God first and see in God a standard of goodness and righteousness by which to measure ourselves, we conclude that we are just fine, but this does not give us an accurate picture because we are measuring human to human and only within the limits of human corruption. Calvin says it's like an eye that has only ever seen blackened objects would consider a dirty white cloth the whitest of white. The sight of a spotless white cloth would reveal the truth that the dirty white cloth actually isn't the whitest of whites. The truly spotless cloth is needed to allow for accurate perception.

Like Calvin, the author of I John directs the attention of his readers first to God and to what was revealed about God in Christ. What Jesus revealed, he says, is that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. This is his way of describing God's completely good, pure, and holy nature. To realize

that God's nature is pure goodness, and holiness, and light is on one hand a great comfort, but the story from Isaiah of his vision of God teaches us that being confronted with God's total purity and glory can also be humbling if not a bit frightening. When Isaiah saw the vision of the Lord on the throne surrounded by the six-winged creatures who were saying to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, the earth is full of his glory" his response wasn't, "how cool is it that I'm just here hanging out with God?" No, Isaiah saw the vision of God in all of God's glory and holiness and said, "Woe to me! I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!" For Isaiah, this was the kind of moment that Calvin was talking about when he said that we only see ourselves rightly when we see ourselves in light of who God is. We may not have the kind of vision that Isaiah had, but when we recognize and acknowledge what God has revealed about himself, that God is light, it teaches us the truth that we are *not* like God. We are not pure light, and goodness, and righteousness. In each of us, there is a mix of light and dark. Sometimes we are good, and sometimes we aren't. Sometimes we reflect the righteousness of God, and sometimes we don't.

The traditional church way of talking about our mixed, or corrupted human nature, and the way that the Bible describes how we fall short of being like God is to say that we are sinners. That is the language that is used in our passage this morning. To say that people sin or that people are sinners can be off-putting or even offensive. Probably the word has been abused and misused by some to control or shame people, but God's desire to reveal to us that we are sinners is not to shame us, or to kill our self-esteem, or to make us feel unworthy or unloved. God is love, and God teaches us the truth about ourselves to teach us that we need God Himself and the love that he shows to us.

In the community that was receiving this letter, it seems that one of the ideas that the false teachers were spreading was the idea that sin was not a problem. They claimed to have fellowship with God, but denying that they were sinners did not erase the truth that they were. Apparently, what was really going on is that they claimed to be pure and claimed to be close to God, but they were not living in a way that was consistent with God's light. Later in chapter 2 we find out that they had no love for others which gave away the true nature of their hearts. Denying their need for God's mercy didn't erase their need for that mercy.

The elder writes to uncover this deception - that denying sin doesn't erase it - but he also writes to give the community assurance. He writes to give them assurance that there is nothing to fear when you see the truth about yourself in light of the truth about God. When, like Isaiah, you recognize that God is pure holiness, goodness, and light, and you realize

that you don't quite measure up - that your motives aren't always pure, that your actions aren't always righteous, that though there might be someone who is morally worse than you there is probably someone who is morally better than you - when we are confronted with this reality - there is nothing to fear because Jesus has already stepped in on our behalf to remove the sin which prevents fellowship with God. Jesus takes away all of the sin and darkness and makes it possible to walk in the light with God.

On this second Sunday of Easter, we are reminded that the resurrection of Jesus confirms this word that is being proclaimed to us is true. In Jesus Christ, sins are forgiven, and the door is opened for people who are afflicted with unholiness to enter into a real, personal, and life-changing relationship with God who is pure light and love. The Scripture challenges us to consider the truth about God that Christ has revealed, and in light of the truth about God, to consider the truth about ourselves. Seeing ourselves as we really are can be one of the hardest things to do, and we are prone to self-deception, but denial and self-deception are never the way to true freedom and joy. It's not always popular or seen as a sign of strength to admit need or imperfection, but Jesus turns the wisdom of the world on its head, and, when we come to Jesus admitting our need he is ready to meet it with grace, and mercy, and love. Perhaps one response to the word that we've heard today is to ask Jesus with intention to show us where we have blind spots and to reveal if there is any wicked way in us. We may fear that we will discover something that we don't really want to change, and if that's what we fear, that's something to talk to Jesus about, but what we never need to fear when we practice confession is that our confession will be met with God's anger or wrath.

I want to end by saying, if you are listening today and God has given you a revelation of God's holiness, and God's Spirit has impressed on your heart that both your sin and your need are real, and you have never talked to God about that - you have never admitted your sin or your need, maybe you never knew that you needed to but today you sense that you do - I invite and encourage you today to respond to what you are sensing. Seek the forgiveness that God offers through Christ. Seek the relationship and fellowship with God that Christ makes possible. It's as simple as saying, "I know that I've fallen short. I trust, Jesus, that you took my sins with you to your cross, and I receive the forgiveness that you offer. I want to enjoy fellowship with you." The words of assurance are right there in our Scripture - if we confess our sin, he will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Amen.