

**An Introduction to John's First Letter:
The Epistle of Christian Certainty**

“These things have I written unto you who believe ... that you may know that you have eternal life (5:13)”.

Background to the Book

1. John of Bethsaida, the brother of James and in the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, somehow came to reside in his later years in Ephesus. Being a shepherd/apostle he wrote this treatise to correct a false teaching that was impacting the churches in his area of Asia Minor.
2. Scholars generally date the writing in the late 80s. Though we cannot be sure of the recipients, the same issues surfaced in two of the seven churches, Pergamum and Thyatira, of the *Revelation* and Ephesus was commended for rejecting them.
3. The issue addressed by the apostle is that of assurance of salvation. Certain unknown teachers taught a supposed higher Christian experience through a second encounter with God lifting the recipient to complete and total victory over sin (“Be of sin the double cure save from wrath and make me whole”). Their argument was that God's holiness requires perfection of us to commune with Him, that we can rise to a state of sinless in this life. Every error in the realm of sanctification is rooted in a misunderstanding of the accomplishments of Christ at Calvary!

Commentary on the Book

I. Introduction 1:1-4

John, writing for all the apostles, begins by describing the message that Christ delivered to them, a message that they saw, heard, and realized (“that what” not “the one who”).

What the apostles learned from Christ is that He is the life-giver, the one who offers eternal life. The message of life is about fellowship in the living God and with each other (John 1:4, 14).

The epistle has two parts. After introducing the life that Christ disclosed (1:1-4), John argues that we can know the life of God to be truly ours (1:5-2:2), and we can be assured of it (2:3-5:20).

II. The Reality of Fellowship: Stated 1:5-2:2

The passage before us explains the criteria of fellowship with God (1:5) and eliminates misperceptions about our fellowship with God.

Though God is perfect and communion with Him, eternal life in Him, requires perfection, the believer need not delude him/herself about sinlessness. Believers are not perfect people; they have been placed in the perfect one! Christ is our righteousness; we possess none of our own and we should not deceive ourselves about it. The passage tells us how imperfect people can know a holy God. Christ is the perfect one, not us!

A. The Criteria of Life in God: Absolute Holiness 1:5

John begins his argument by making a claim that his opponents not dissent; God is absolute, unsullied perfection. He would assert that fellowship, eternal life, knowing God, is not a result of reaching a spiritual plateau or human perfection. It is occasioned by our union with God in Christ. Acts of sin are a reality that does not eliminate life in God.

“This is the message” links this verse with the introduction. “That which” the apostles seen, heard, and contemplated is what John is about to describe. Also, the word, “heard,” is repeated from verses one and two. “Proclaim (v. 3),” is parallel to “write”.

The phrase, “God is light,” does not specifically appear in the teachings of Jesus. However, John spoke of Him in the Gospel as the “light of the world (8:12, 9:5)”.

“Light” is the key to the verse. The essence of God is witnessed to us by His acts; they are done in perfect holiness, righteousness, goodness, and truth (moral qualities). In Him, there is nothing that is unholy or unrighteous, evil or false. Light or holiness is the essential character of God. It speaks of flawless perfection! To walk with God is to have the standards of perfection that He alone possesses; thus, we need a substitute!

“Darkness” is the opposite of light. It is the opposite of life (2:11). It has nothing to do with God. John delights in comparative statements! Ten times in the epistle it means “sin” (the evidence of a lack of moral character).

The basic question is this: If God is holy and you and I are not, how can we say that we know God? Apparently, some taught (or John surmised that some would teach this and so writes in anticipation of it) that the Christian could obtain sinlessness one way or another and that they alone can therefore meet the requirement to know God. “Since God is holy and since we have obtained perfect holiness, we know God,” some suggested. John says that sinlessness perfection is a delusion, but fellowship with a holy God is not. Sinful people can walk with a holy God, if they are in Christ.

The paragraph before us (1:6-2:2) had a distinct pattern: three false claims (“if we say (vv.6, 8, 10”); three disclaimers (“we lie [v. 6],” “we deceive ourselves [v. 8]”, “we make him a liar [v. 10];” and three correctives or antidotes (1: 7, 9; 2:1-2).

John’s insight into Christian behavior is three-fold:

---Redemption does not destroy the sin nature.

---Redemption does not mean that we are without sin.

---Redemption does not mean that we have reached perfection in this life.

1. The Incongruity of Spiritual Life and the Habitual Practice of sin 1:6-7

The repetition of “we (6 times)” is likely hypothetical; John raises the issue for all of us.

a) The false claim, v. 6a

The false claim is that sin does not matter, that a person can be characterized by sinful practices and still validly claim to know a holy God. “Walk in darkness” suggests a habitual lifestyle of disobedience (a settled unremitting calloused lifestyle) that would encompass little guilt and even delight in wrongdoing.

b) The disclaimer or condemnation, v. 6b

John is adamant. The “and yet” indicates a negative. The claim that sin does not matter is evidence of sin that does matter!

c) The antidote or corrective, v. 7

Christian sinfulness is a reality for all of us; denial does not make it go away. Denial is not godliness. Further, we miss a wonderful truth that calls for praise.

Those who walk in the light do so because of the efficacy of the work of Christ on our behalf. We can have a life characterized by “walk in the light” (a present tense verb), because we are seen through the cleansing blood of Christ. It is not about a denial of what we are and do; it is an embrace of the wonder of what Christ has provided for us.

It is interesting that John instructs us to walk “in the light,” not “according to the light”. The latter would require sinless perfection!

“Blood of Jesus Christ,” or his life-giving death, is the ground of walking with God. It is not about denying that sin makes no difference. It cost God’s son to obtain forgiveness for us.

“His son” tells us that Jesus is God (“Like father, like son”). It also explains why His death cleanses from sin and allows us to have communion with God and each other.

“Cleanses” is in the present tense suggesting continual action. If we know God in Christ, we are continually being cleansed. The verb suggests more than “forgive:” it means to erase the stain of sin. We are continually being washed!

The word, “all,” should be a topic of meditation behavior and delight. There is no sin, however horrible, that is not included in it.

d) The Incongruity of Spiritual Life without guilt, vv. 8-9

Perhaps, it could be argued that, though sin does matter, there are some of us that are sinless.

a) The false claim, v. 8a

The claim here is that our actions do not matter in the Christian’s life, because through God’s redemptive act, the old nature has been eradicated in us. Sin is real and matters but not to the Christian who is cleansed from a corrupt nature at rebirth.

b) The disclaimer or condemnation, v. 8b

Such a theory is pure deception on our part.

c) The antidote or corrective, v. 9

The true saint of God is not one who says that sin does not exist in our lives; we confess our sins to God.

“Confess,” a present tense verb, means to agree with God. The remedy for the sinning saint is not denial; it is confession! Notice that “sins” is plural and the tense of the verb, “confess,” is present. Our sins are many and agreeing with God about it, having the same attitude that God has about it, is a never-ending practice in this life.

God will forgive and cleanse us of our sins, a plural noun). The repetition of the word “cleanse” from v. 7 indicates that this verse expands the thought. “Forgive” is the response of God to our debt; “cleanse” or purification has to do with the stain of sin.

God is faithful to forgive us because of His promises to us; He is just or righteous in forgiving us because His Son died for our sins. God can rightly forgive us because Jesus paid the debt we owed to God.

3) The Incongruity of Spiritual Life and Perfectionism 1:10-2:2

a) The false claim, v. 10a

Though it is clear that perpetual sinfulness and the claim that we know God is as false as the claim we have never sinned, it might be argued that we have sinned but subsequently reached a place where we have ceased to sin; this is the teaching of perfectionism.

b) The disclaimer or condemnation, v. 10b

It is a lie and the evidence in embracing the idea that such a claimant does not know the Lord. Those who deny their sin thus fall into the serious sin of making God out to be a liar.

c) The antidote or corrective, 2: 1-2

“My children” appears six times in this book. It suggests John’s great care, perhaps the one through whom they received Christ.

While the saint is not sinless, John makes the point that his teaching does not promote sinning. He does not wish to give his readers the idea that sin may be regarded as a normal phenomenon in the Christian life. However, “if” we do sin there is an answer, not in denial, but a turning to Christ and His provision for us.

We have nothing that we can plead before God to gain us forgiveness for our sins, but Jesus Christ acts as our advocate and enters His plea for us. The language is legal; it is that of the heavenly courtroom. The word, “advocate,” is found only five times in the New Testament, every time in John’s writings. It is used here in reference to Christ, the other four times it refers to the Spirit.

Jesus can be our advocate, the one who pleads our case, because He is righteous. That is, He alone can plead our case because He meets God’s righteous standard of justice and righteousness. He can, as it were, plead his own righteousness before God and ask that sinners be forgiven on the basis of His righteous act.

The reason that Jesus (“He Himself” and no one else) can plead the sinner’s case is that He “the propitiation for our sins,” or the atoning sacrifice for our sins. The word, “propitiation,” means to placate an offended party. The atoning sacrifice is, of course, the death of Jesus. This is clear from the fact that in the parallel statement in 1:7, it is the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from sin, blood being a metaphor for a sacrificial death.

John adds an afterthought. This provision of Christ is not for a particular group of people; it is available to all people who see the need of it. I take world to me “all types of people” (“red, yellow, black,

and white). This seems to align with his later comment that Jesus is the “Savior of the World” (4:13).

Applications:

1. To truly know God is to possess the righteousness of God (1:5). This is impossible for any creature; we disparately need someone to stand before God for us. We need a legal advocate who is righteous and willing to plead our case.
2. Jesus Christ qualifies to be our advocate because he is righteous (1:9, 2:1). Being God, He alone can stand for us before God to plead our case.
3. The basis of Jesus’ advocacy for us is His sacrificial death (“blood,” 1:7) for us. Jesus does not plead our righteousness, but His own!
4. We can have assurance that Christ is our advocate, pleading for us before God to justly acquit us, based upon His satisfaction of our debt (“cleanses us from all sin”, 1:7; “propitiation for our sins,” 2:2).
5. One does not have to be perfect to possess the life of God. It is impossible for sinners. Christ is our perfection. All we must do is trust in Christ as our righteousness.
6. We must not delude ourselves that we have reached a spiritual plateau where we no longer sin. Such a belief would dishonor God. We are not sinless people; we are forgiven sinners! Sinfulness and righteousness are not opposites for us. We are simultaneously saints and sinners!!

Charles Wesley has given us a wonderful hymn that captures the thought of our lesson today, “Arise, My Soul, Arise” (1742).

He ever lives above
For me to intercede,
His all-redeeming love,
His precious blood, to plead;
His blood atoned for all our race,
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

Five bleeding wounds He bears,
Received on Calvary;
They pour effectual prayers’
They strongly speak for me;
Forgive him, O forgive! They cry,
Nor let that ransom’d sinner die!

My God is reconciled.
His pardoning voice I hear;
He owns me for His child,

I can no longer fear;
With confidence I now draw nigh...
And "Father Abba Father" I cry