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Walking in Light and Forgiveness (1 John 1:5-10)

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Just before her death in 1988, author and avowed atheist Marghanita Laski made this observation: “What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have no one to forgive me.” I hope the first part of her quote is accurate – that followers of Christ would be characterized by a forgiving spirit. But what she didn’t realize is that the second half of her quote was completely false. Just like all people, forgiveness was available to Laski and we’ll see why in this study.

We all need forgiveness. Finding examples of it in the realm of politics is a challenge, though. Maybe the greatest illustration in our own nation’s history is found in the final paragraph of President Lincoln’s second inaugural address following years of the bitter, brutal Civil War and the hatred that caused it.

He said, “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

John wrote of the reality of sin and the need to be forgiven. There is a wide chasm that separates sinful humans from a holy God and in this passage, John addresses that very problem. How can we have peace with God? What provision has he made so that we can be reconciled to him?

I. THE PURITY OF GOD (1:5, 7)

1 John 1:5, 7 - This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. But 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 cleanses us from all sin.

John, after establishing his credibility in the first four verses, starts his message with a very simple yet profound truth. God is light. This is a theme seen from the beginning of Scripture through the final verses of Revelation, because light is the answer to the problem facing humans. Sin has darkened our earthly experience. On our own, we wander morally, without a compass or guide to make clear what our path should be. Giving illumination to people is in the character of God. His essence is light, holiness and purity.

When I had my leg amputation I faced several months of learning to walk again with a prosthesis. The therapist took me through many exercises to develop strength, flexibility and endurance. But the

strangest feeling was learning balance. She had me perform some exercises on a block of foam, which made balancing a challenge. After I got used to steadying myself, she would push me in random places from behind – right shoulder, left hip, left shoulder – I didn’t know where the next push would come from. I quickly learned how to adjust and compensate for the abrupt movements.

Then she had me close my eyes. That changed everything. With no sight, all bearings were lost. I still lose my balance in dark areas or when putting on a shirt. Without light, we lose perspective and focus. Having even a little light makes all the difference. Not only is God light, but he makes it possible for us to take part in that light.

Ephesians 5: 8, 9 - ... for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)

John 8:12 - Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

It’s a tragedy that so many in our world try to find light on their own. Some have never heard about the light of God, but many have and have still rejected him. They try to explain the universe without God in the picture, then subsequently have to account for questions to which they invariably give insufficient answers. Where did everything come from? How did life and death come about? What decides whether something is right or wrong? What is the ultimate destiny of all things? The answers to these and thousands of other questions are nonsense without the light of God and the illumination he gives through his revealed Word.

A MAN CAN NO MORE DIMINISH GOD’S GLORY BY REFUSING TO WORSHIP HIM THAN A LUNATIC CAN PUT OUT THE SUN BY SCRIBBLING THE WORD ‘DARKNESS’ ON THE WALLS OF HIS CELL. (C. S. LEWIS)

II. THE POISON OF SELF-DECEPTION (1:6, 8, 10)

1 John 1:6, 8, 10 - If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

The story has been told about a particular argument Abraham Lincoln found himself in one day. Seeing that he was not getting anywhere with his rival, Lincoln said, “How many legs does a cow

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have?” The disgusted man replied, “Well, four, of course.” Lincoln agreed and asked, “If you called his tail a leg, then how many legs would the cow have?” “Five, of course.” Lincoln said, “That’s where you’re wrong. Calling a cow’s tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg.”

People have tried to rationalize their natural condition almost since time began. We love to redefine a situation so that it fits our worldview or somehow soothes our conscience. But redefining what God has already defined is useless and does not change his original intent. One of these areas of deception is sin.

Anyone who takes sin lightly or does not see their need for a Savior has redefined the terms of the gospel. Sin is a reality for every person ever born (except Jesus). It’s our natural makeup.

Jeremiah 17:9 - The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

Romans 5:12 - Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

That’s God’s definition of where humans are spiritually unless we repent and turn to him. Our word sin comes from a Greek word that means “to miss the mark”. We all sin; we have all missed the mark. We are in no position to deny that, yet many have tried.

That is the motivation behind many people rejecting God. If we haven’t sinned, or if we’re trying our best, we have no real need for a Savior. As soon as you agree with God that you are a sinner, then you are accountable for that sin and none of us likes to be told what to do. That is also built into our humanity.

But notice also the strong language John uses here. If a person persists in sin, saying that he really isn’t a sinner, he is saying that God is a liar. Deny sin is not only self-deception, but also blasphemy.

III. THE PROMISE OF FORGIVENESS (1:9)

1 John 1:9 - If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Other than John 3:16, this might be the most well-known of all the sentences John was inspired to write. In it, we find God’s plan for the ages to span the gulf between his holiness and our unrighteousness; it’s the answer to the chronic spiritual disease of sin that we all possess.

It’s a promise, but it’s conditional. The “if” at the beginning is our part and launches the work of God in the rest of the verse. For our responsibility to be met, namely confession, it’s obvious that we must admit that we are sinners, avoiding the very self-deception we were just warned against.

The word translated “confession” is key to understanding what we must do. It literally means “to say the same thing as”. When a criminal confesses, he is agreeing with the charges against him. That is what we do in confessing to God. He says we are sinners and tells us what that is in his Word, then we say the same thing. That is confession. As you pray, God will bring to your mind where you have “missed the mark” or you may be convicted of a sin immediately. As you confess and repent, choosing to follow and obey him in a new way, the promise in this verse is yours.

Paul also wrote of the importance of confession and how closely it is linked to what we believe.

Romans 10:9, 10 - if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

The promise is forgiveness. God has done all the work to accomplish this through his Son, Jesus. We cannot earn forgiveness and certainly don’t deserve it, yet God is merciful. John emphasizes here God’s faithfulness and justice. You can count on this promise.

John says we will be cleansed. That Greek word is “katharizo” – does it sound familiar? Friend, if you’re looking for true catharsis and purity in life, it can be found in the forgiveness of God through Christ. Will we ever be perfect? Not in this world, but that’s why we need a way to be cleansed. He does it; we can’t cause it or earn it.

So, we each have a decision to make. Will we follow God and his way or devise our own plan to get through life? There is no third option and the final destinies of these two choices are clear and certain.