

The Great Community of Love – 2

1 John 1:5-10

When Jeremiah said that ‘the heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?’ (Jer. 17:9), he was saying no more than John says in his first letter. The tendency to self-deception is with us all the time. The way we evaluate ourselves and misrepresent reality is astounding. We can move from justifying ourselves to condemning ourselves so easily and so rapidly. Jeremiah’s comment comes in the context of his awareness that rebellious Judah is the covenant people, that what they experience from their enemies is no less than the curse of God upon their disobedience (Jer. 17:1-6). On the other hand, the blessing of God remains for ‘those who trust in the LORD’ (Jer. 17:7).

One of the problems Jeremiah faced was that those whose trust was ‘in mere mortals [and] whose hearts turn away from the LORD’ strenuously denied that that was the case. They boasted that they had no sin, saying, ‘I am innocent; surely his anger has turned from me’ (Jer. 2:35). But Jeremiah knew that while the wicked may boast of their security (see Jer. 7:4), and perhaps the righteous are puzzled as to why they must endure God’s apparent judgment (Jer. 15:15-18), the final arbiter is God himself:

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?

¹⁰I the LORD test the mind and search the heart,

to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings. (Jer. 17:9-10)

To trust in the LORD is to believe what he says and to be fruitful in godly living (contrast Jer. 8:13), with the law of God having been written on the heart when iniquity and guilt are removed (Jer. 31:31-34).

Of course John writes his work in the context of the cross of Christ and the reality of God’s revelation in him. We have seen that the proclamation of the apostles was the result of a dynamic revelation. That revelation was living, powerful and personal; the Word actually became flesh and dwelt among us and we say his glory! But there was more to the revelation than the simple(!) appearing of the Word. The revelation was with a view to the bringing together of the people of God into a fellowship, a *koinōnia*, with each other which was authentic because its essence lay in the fellowship each had with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. It is clear from elsewhere in the New Testament that this fellowship *with* the Father and the Son (and the Spirit) into which we are drawn is the fellowship *of* the Father, Son and Spirit in which we are given to participate.¹

John’s expressed purpose was to bring the readers *back* into the experience of joy which had come to them in the beginning. It was the joy of salvation (cf. Ps. 51:12) which was no less than the joy of the Son in the adopted children² (John 15:11; Heb.

¹ We may assume that none of the books of the New Testament was written to people who had not been exposed to the full apostolic gospel. Each book had its own reason for being written, but could assume the whole range of truth. We may, therefore, interrogate the whole of the New Testament in order to elucidate aspects of a particular writing.

² When describing our relationship with God, with one exception (Rev. 21:7), John never uses the word ‘son’; he uses ‘son’ only for Jesus. See John 1:12; 1 John 3:1-2.

2:10-13). In order for the readers to know fulness of joy, there must be active participation in the truth, passive participation being something of a contradiction in terms, as we will see.

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. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but 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. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:5-10)

The truth has come to us! It is in us and we do it. The NRSV has in verse 6, ‘do what is true’³, but it is the word ‘truth’ that John has used, as he has also done in verse 8. We recall that Jesus said that the truth is liberating (John 8:32) and Paul agreed by saying that where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty (2 Cor. 3:17). Pontius Pilate had asked Jesus, ‘What is truth?’. Perhaps his question was cynical, but even so we, as John’s readers, would know that Jesus had already declared that he is the truth—of the Father (John 14:6). His glory is in being the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Furthermore, the Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John 16:13) and as such he leads us into⁴ all the truth, the truth of the Son which is the truth of the Father. This is not a set of abstract propositions to be pondered but a sphere in which we now live. Paul even used an unusual word in Ephesians 4:15⁵, and we may translate his phrase as ‘truthing in love’, or perhaps, ‘doing the truth in love’. While speaking the truth in love is usually understood there, the phrase does not actually say so and there would be other, simpler, ways of saying that. Truth is what we do.

Truth is the sphere in which we live and move and have our being. It is that because truth is all that God is and all that he himself is doing. It is the sphere where all makes sense, whether or not we can explain it, because we can see God in his great action from eternity to eternity and we can see what sort of God he is, the holy Father (John 17:11), and thus all our questions dissolve in the knowledge we now have and all our sinfulness, in action as well as in inclination, is shown to be completely ugly and inappropriate for such fellowship as this, and also it is seen to be totally purged by the atoning blood of God’s Son. To be in the truth is to be completely one with all the character of God. It is to be righteous, to have been justified (which are one and the same thing). It is to be holy (sanctified), not from our own accomplishments but by faith in Christ (Acts 26:18).

Given our propensity for self-deception, and given also that our bodies are not yet redeemed (Rom. 8:23; 7:24), it is vital, then, that John reminds the readers of the announcement which he and his fellow apostles heard from God and which they in turn announced to the present readers. That announcement was, ‘God is light and in him is no darkness at all’. Sadly this has often been presented as a negative assertion, namely, that God is opposed to evil, which of course he is. But that is not what is intended and once a person sees the truth it becomes clear. God is light means that God is pure moral light in himself. This is the essential nature of all that is because it

³ NIV has ‘do not live by the truth’. I suspect that has reduced truth to a matter of information.

⁴ Greek ἐν (*en*). It is a mistake to limit the meaning of this preposition. Some MSS have εἰς (*eis*), making ‘into’ more explicit.

⁵ ἀληθεύω *alētheuō*.

is the essential nature of God. Light is never a reaction against darkness; in reality, the reverse is the case. Darkness is the denial of the light. Evil, and those gripped in their guilt, will always attempt to extinguish the light (cf. Isa. 5:20; John 3:19-21; Rom. 1:18).

In John 1:4-5, 9, and 8:12, Jesus is identified as the light. All the light which is God himself was found in the person of Jesus, the Word of God, the incarnate glory of God. As long as he is in the world, he is the light of the world (John 9:5). There can be doubt as to why the darkness tries to overcome the light: light is a continual threat to the darkness. As those in Christ, we should never be surprised, then, if the world hates us. Subtly or overtly, it must remove the light which exposes the ugliness and perversity of evil.

‘God is light and in him there is no darkness at all’ does not sound like the gospel we see proclaimed in Acts or the writings of Paul, or indeed the way John describes the action of God’s love in 1 John 4:9-10. But it is the gospel, since this declaration by John is not a definition of God so much as a description of all that he does because of who he is. God will not have a creation in which moral darkness has any place; ‘nothing unclean will enter’ (Rev. 21:27) the holy city where the glory of God is the light shining from the Lamb (Rev. 21:24), in the new heavens and new earth where righteousness is in place without challenge (2 Pet. 3:13). The work of the atonement is to cleanse us from all sin now so that we may not sin now (1 John 2:1; 3:9), even though the goal of total sinlessness has not yet been reached (cf. 1 John 3:2-3 with its focus on our hope).

The consequence of the gospel being received is that believers are now participants in the light of God’s being and action. They are one with him. So the obvious conclusion is that if we say we have fellowship with God but contradict that by our actions, that is, by actions which demonstrate *indifference* to the truth of God, then we are liars and are not doing the truth. However, if we do walk in the light as he is in the light, then we will truly know fellowship with one another, which means, as we have seen, fellowship with the Father and Son.

It is obvious that John is not saying that fellowship is something which is earned by moral living. He is saying that the fellowship which exists within the Father, Son and Spirit cannot be known by us apart from moral living, apart from walking in the light. Our experience of the joy of salvation is dependent on us living in the fulness of that salvation. Godly living is the fruit of the salvation won for us by the atoning death of Christ, and our eagerness to be holy in all we do flows from the awareness of forgiveness and our total acceptance by God.

Walking in the light means being in the sphere where the cleansing blood of Christ is always operative and effective. When John wrote, ‘the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from us sin’ (1 John 1:7), he meant far more than that the blood of Christ ‘cleansed’ us from all sin. He meant that the once for all sacrifice stands over all history, including our personal histories, and never fails in its effectiveness. Salvation does not mean we receive initial entry with the future then left to us and our efforts. The blood of Jesus *goes on cleansing*⁶ us from all sin. We need never fear falling from grace because we are too weak to survive the demands made on us. Quite the opposite, the demands made on us are grace-full demands. Awareness of our continual weakness and our continual sinfulness now is in fact the key to the joy of fellowship, since, as Paul put it, grace is sufficient for us (2 Cor. 12:9).

⁶ The Greek present tense carries this implication.

So to walk in the light is to live an authentic life in the constant cleansing which Christ supplies. It is certainly not to live in personal perfection or, as the only possibility, in any presumption of it. Indeed, to say that, of ourselves and apart from the blood of Christ, we have no sin is that very self-deception we have discussed. But worse, it is to live apart from the truth. It is plain that it is not important to know whether John's opponents were saying that personal holiness did not matter or that they had actually attained it. John is concerned that his readers should understand the indispensability and implications of the cross of Christ. The truth is who God is and what he is about in history, and that must be seen as focussing fully at the cross of his Son.

John's famous statement in 1 John 1:9 must be understood in this context. John wrote:

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

He is not asserting that confession earns forgiveness, as if without confession some damning guilt will remain. He is saying that the truth of the cross of Christ is indispensable to every life and to all of history. To confess our sin hardly means dredging up past failures in order to have them forgiven (1 John 2:12). *To confess our sin is to confess our constant need of his action for us and therefore to know that continuous action.* Verse 7 of this chapter said that 'the blood of Jesus his Son goes on cleansing us from all sin'. In view of that continuous work, John is saying that as we confess our sin we know that God is faithful to his own character and purpose, and he is just, meaning he actually treats our sin seriously, and fully and effectively judges it in the cross of Christ. Thus we know that he forgives our sin and cleanses us totally — from *all* sin, all unrighteousness. In the present this is known by faith (see for instance 1 John 5:4b), while our secure hope is that when we see him we will be like him (1 John 3:2). This is the great motivation and power for true moral living.

It is hard to know precisely the situation John is addressing in 1 John 1:10. Possibly it is one where people either claim that since they became Christians they no longer sin or, and I suspect more likely, they claim that their divisiveness was not sin. But the conclusion remains the same: to say that we have not sinned is senseless. It is standing over against the truth of God and calling him a liar. It is calling light darkness and darkness light (Isa. 5:20). It is more than senseless, it is evil, since it is to sever oneself from the word of God. The apostolic testimony is that creation came by the word (Heb. 11:3) and so did recreation (Rom. 10:17; 2 Cor. 4:6; James 1:18) and it is imperative that that same powerful sustaining word (Heb. 1:3) should be continually at work in us (Col. 3:16). What is more, that is our responsibility. We are obliged to go on letting that word dwell richly in us. We are not to be passive in all this, indeed the whole dynamic of the cross is known in the action of faith.

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