

Life with Father

by Ray C. Stedman

With this message, we begin a study of the first letter of the Apostle John. You will remember that from Paul we learned it was the task of the apostles to lay the foundation of the church, the only foundation which men can lay, which is Jesus Christ. But each of the apostles has a specific function in laying this foundation. Paul does not do the same thing as John, Peter has a different task than Paul or John, and Jude is called to yet another ministry. They all have a very important task, but God commits something original to each of these men to be passed along to us.

Watchman Nee, in his very helpful book, *What Shall This Man Do?* suggests that these three ministries of John, Peter, and Paul can be distinguished by, and are characterized by, the tasks that each of these men were performing when they were called of God:

- Peter, for instance, was called as a fisherman, and we are told in the Gospels that the moment of his call occurred when the Lord found him casting a net into the sea. That work of fishing for men is characteristic of the Apostle Peter. He is always beginning things, initiating new programs. To him was committed the keys of the kingdom by which he could open the door to the new things God was introducing. On the day of Pentecost he used one of those keys and as a result caught 3,000 fish in his gospel net. You find that characteristic of this man all through his written ministry.
- To the Apostle Paul, however, was committed a different task. When Paul was called he was a tentmaker. He made things. He built things. This, then, was the ministry committed to the Apostle Paul. He is a builder. He not only lays the foundation, but he builds upon it. He calls himself “a wise master-builder” and to this man, this mighty apostle, was committed

the task of building the great doctrinal foundation upon which the Christian faith rests.

- But John is different than both of these. When John was called he was found mending his nets. John is a mender. His written ministry comes in after the church has been in existence for several decades, and at a time when apostasy had begun to creep in. There was need of a voice to call people back to the original foundations and that is the ministry of the Apostle John. He calls men back to truth. When we begin to drift, when some false concept creeps into our thinking or into our actions, it is John who is ordained of the Lord to call us back, to mend the nets and to set things straight.

We will find that to be his ministry particularly in these letters. We shall read the first four verses, which constitute his introduction to this first letter:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy [or, your joy] may be complete. {1 Jn 1:1-4 RSV}

Three things are highlighted for us in this introduction: A relationship, a fellowship, and a joy that follows. But it must all begin with this

matter of relationship, for John is concerned first about the family of God. John and Peter and Paul all have different ministries, as I have suggested. It was Peter's task to talk about the kingdom of God, Paul about the church of God, but John is concerned with the family of God. These are all the same thing, but they are viewed from three different aspects. It is into the intimacy of the family circle, now, that the Apostle John takes us. Therefore this letter can be properly described as introducing us to life with the Father, the intimacy of the family circle of God.

If you read through the letter, as I hope you will many times while we are studying together, you will find there are four different reasons John gives for writing this letter:

- One is in the passage just read, Verse 4. "And we are writing this that your joy may be complete."
- Then in Chapter 2, Verse 1, he says, "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin."
- And in Chapter 2, Verse 26, he gives us the third reason: "I write this to you about those who would deceive you."
- In Chapter 5, Verse 13, he gives us the fourth reason: "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life."

If you think about these four reasons for a moment you will find something remarkable about them. He is first concerned about the joy of companionship which is, of course, the solution to the problem of loneliness. There is nothing more helpful in curing loneliness than a family circle. When you get lonely where do you want to go? Home, to the family! So John writes, "I write this that your joy may be full," answering the fear and problem of loneliness. Then he says, "I am writing this so that you may not sin." Here he is dealing with another great threat to human happiness, the problem of guilt. Again he says, "I write this to you about those who would deceive you." In other words he is writing to protect us, in order that we might be free from deception. Here is another great

problem area of life: Where do we get answers? How do we know what is true? That is what this letter is written for, that we might be free from deception. Finally he says, "I am writing this to assure you" – that you might find security, freedom from failure. Who of us is not concerned with that? How do you find your way through life successfully? How do we know we are not going to fail? John says, "I write this in order that you might have assurance," be secure, free from failure.

Now let us go back to these opening verses and see what he has to say. These are tremendously important verses.

1. First, he is talking about a relationship:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – {1 Jn 1:1 RSV}

It is evident he is talking about a person, whom, he says is "from the beginning." This is one of the favorite phrases of the Apostle John "from the beginning."

There are at least three "beginnings" in the Bible:

- The Bible opens with the phrases, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," {Gen 1:1}. That is the beginning of the material creation, of matter. How far back it goes no one knows. That verse encompasses the very dawn of creation and it is impossible for us to tell how far back it is. Neither science nor Scripture answers. Science suggest it was millions of years ago, and Scripture is quite ready to accommodate that. As Dr. J. Vernon McGee puts it, "you can go back squillions of years and there is still ample room." The first beginning is the beginning of creation.
- Now, in the Gospel of John there is another "beginning." That Gospel begins with these words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," {John 1:1 RSV}.

That beginning goes back before creation. That is the unbeginning beginning, the beginning that is eternal. That simply means at the starting point. We humans have to start somewhere in our thinking. We are finite creatures and we must always have a starting point. We have to start with **A** in order, eventually, to arrive at **Z**, and it is that **A** which John is describing in the Gospel. Before there was anything at all, there was the Word. That Word was a Person, and he was with God, and he was God. That is the farthest point backward that we can go.

- But now, in this letter, there is still a third beginning, “that which was from the beginning.” Here John does not mean either the time of creation or the unbeginning beginning, the timeless beginning. He is referring to a definite matter here for he uses this phrase many times. Note a few places where he uses it and you will see how he uses it:
 - ⇒ In Chapter 2, Verse 7, he says “Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning.”
 - ⇒ In Verse 14, he says, “I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.”
 - ⇒ In Verse 24, he says, “Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father.”
 - ⇒ In Chapter 3, Verse 8, “He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning.”
 - ⇒ Verse 11, “For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”

It is difficult to locate this beginning, is it not? It seems to shift from time to time. It is what we might call the contemporary beginning, or, to use a very popular phrase these days that few really understand, the

existential beginning. That simply means “the beginning I am experiencing right now.” John is really referring to the continuous experience of the Christian life, which is contemporary all the time, new and fresh and vital, a continuous beginning which is eternal. It has been available for all time, but you only began it when you came to know Jesus Christ. The writers of the New Testament began it when they came to know him, and John began it when he first knew him. It relates to him who is from the beginning. Now that is about as far as we can go in understanding that, for this is a timeless beginning that is right now, an eternal now.

It is, however, important, for John warns all through this letter that we must cling only to that which is “from the beginning.” If someone comes to you with something new, he says, don’t believe it. It must be from the beginning. The cults today say, “Look, we have something different, additional, something that has come along much later in history than the Bible; we have an additional revelation to give you.” Say to them, “Keep it. I want that which is from the beginning.” John reminds us frequently, go back to that which is from the beginning.

Now he says this one from the beginning is a Person, and he has been seen and heard and handled. In other words, Christian faith rests upon great facts, the acts of a human being in history. We have stressed this before in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Our Christian faith does not rest simply on ideas, or doctrinal statements. That is why becoming a Christian is not simply a matter of joining a church, or believing a certain creed, or signing a doctrinal statement. That has nothing to do with becoming a Christian. John points out that becoming a Christian is to be related to a Person.

All of us are related to someone. We live in families. God delights ‘to set the solitary in families.’ Children are related to their parents, and parents to their children. Why? Because they share the same life. And that is what makes a Christian, to share the life of God by

relationship to a Person, the only Person who has that life, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. At the close of this letter John tells us, "He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life," {1 Jn 5:12 RSV}. It is that simple. No matter how religious you may be, you do not have life if you do not have the Son, you are not a Christian. John makes this crystal clear at the beginning of his letter, calling us back to these fundamental things.

That which was from the beginning, he says, is a real Person. We looked at him, we heard him, we touched him, he actually appeared in history. He is an historical being. We knew him, we had fellowship with him, we lived with him, we ate with him, we slept with him, we heard his words, we have never forgotten them. This is the point to which all objections to Christianity are ultimately directed, an attempt to destroy this basis of fact. The forces which seek to overthrow Christian faith today try to undermine our confidence in the facts of Scripture, these great historical truths about a Person who appeared in time. That is why it is not at all unimportant that we should believe the story as it is recorded in the Gospels. We must believe these facts. We cannot believe merely in ideas, doctrinal statements. We must come down at last to factual things, facts, acts of God in history.

Now that is where John begins. He tells us what he himself experienced. We touched him, he says, we felt his warm, human flesh, we looked into his human eyes, we felt the beating of his human heart, and yet, as we did, we became aware that we were listening to the heartbeat of God, and in contact with the life of God. He took that life and laid it down in order that we might have it. He gave it to us through the cross and that life is what makes us part of the family.

Now he goes on to say, in Verse 2, that this life was made manifest, made visible. Twice he says it. What does he mean by it? He means that this eternal life was visible in the relationship of the Father and the Son. Jesus did not come to show us God, he came to show us man related to God. As you look at the life of Jesus you will see this secret relationship, this lost secret of humanity, this new way by

which man is intended to live – a continual dependence upon the life of the Father. Look at the earthly life of Jesus and this is exactly what you see. He keeps saying, "I don't do these things, it's not I who accomplishes these works, it is the Father who dwells in me," {cf, John 14:10}. He is continually reminding people that he says only what the Father is saying through him that they are not his words, he simply looked to God and trusted God to be working through him, leading him to think the thoughts and to say the things that God wanted him to say. In doing this he expressed exactly the mind of God. It is that life that John is talking about, a new way of living, a new way of reacting to situations in dependence upon God.

Last Saturday night in Southern California a Christian man came up to me and said, "I've been a professional baseball player all my life. I learned early that in order to be a success I had to have self-confidence. I had to be confident to be able to do things. I became one of the top players in my league, and I did it by being self-confident. Now you tell me that this is not the way, that I'm not to have confidence in myself but to have confidence in God in me. How do you do this?" I replied, "It's very simple. You must renounce your confidence in yourself and recognize that God, working through you, can do far more than you could ever do by confidence in yourself; that there would be an eternal effect if it is God at work in you. When you are confident in yourself all that you accomplish is what you can see. But when God is at work in you, you not only accomplish what you can see but far more that you can't see. You change lives. People are affected permanently and you leave an impression behind that is not forgotten. That's tremendously different." He said, "I think I see what you mean, but I have a great deal of difficulty with this." I told him, "I know you do. This is one of the hardest things to learn because it is a wholly different way of life than the way we were brought up. But it is the way that was manifest in the Lord Jesus himself. He lived this way. The explanation of that one unforgettable life is that he demonstrated what it means to walk in continual dependence upon a God who dwelt within him."

“This life was manifest,” John says, “and we are going to tell you about it, we are going to proclaim it to you.”

2. Then he says that this life will result in two wonderful things: First, fellowship. Here John comes to the most beautiful thing about family life – fellowship, companionship:

that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; {1 Jn 1:3a RSV}

What is fellowship? In the Navy we used to say it was two fellows on the same ship, and there is a sense in which that is true. They do have something in common – the same ship. That is the basis of fellowship for essentially this word means “to have all things in common.” When you have something in common with another you can have fellowship with him. If you have nothing in common, you have no fellowship. We all have things in common. We share human life in common. Most of us share American citizenship in common. We have many things in common. But John is talking about that unique fellowship which is only the possession of those who share life in Jesus Christ together, who have this different kind of life, this new relationship. This makes them one and that is the basis for the appeal of Scripture to live together in tenderness and love toward one another. Not because we are inherently wonderful people or remarkable personalities, or that we are naturally gracious, kind, loving, and tender all the time – for at times we are grouchy, scratchy, and irritating to others. But we are still to love one another. That is his point. Why? Because we share life together. We have something in common. We share the life of the Lord Jesus, and therefore we have fellowship with one another.

Ah, but that is not all, and it cannot be all. There is not only the horizontal relationship but that, in turn, depends upon a vertical one. He goes on, “and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” We shall discover, as we go on as Christians, that the horizontal relationship is directly related to the

vertical one. If the vertical is not right, the horizontal one will be wrong, and, if it is wrong, it is because something is wrong between us and the Father. If we want to straighten out the horizontal relationship, that of getting along with our fellow Christians and fellow men, we must be sure that the vertical one is straight. Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Now fellowship there means exactly the same thing it means elsewhere. It means having things in common. Here we come to the most remarkable thing about Christian life, communion, or fellowship with Christ. It really takes two English words to bring out what this really means. There is, first of all, a partnership, i.e., the sharing of mutual interests, mutual resources, mutual labor together. God and I, working together, a partnership. All that I have is put at his disposal. Well, what do I have? I have me. I have my mind, my body. True, these are gifts of God, but they are put at my disposal to do with as I please. That is what I have, and now I put them at his disposal. When I do I discover something most remarkable. Everything that he is, is put at my disposal. Is that not marvelous? The greatness of God, the wisdom, the power, the glory of his might – all is made available to me, when I make myself available to him. This is the great secret of fellowship.

This means that he makes available to me that which I desperately lack, wisdom and power, the ability to do. There are things I know I want to do, things I would like to do because it is his will, what he wants. But I can only do them as I make myself available to him, depending upon him to come through from his side, making himself available to me. Then I discover that I can do what I want to do. That is what Paul says: “I can do all things, through Christ who strengthens me,” {cf, Phil 4:13}.

But it is not only partnership, there is also friendship. Friendship and partnership together spell fellowship. Have you ever thought of this, that God desires you to be his friend? What do you do with a friend? You tell him secrets. That is what friends are for. You tell

them intimate things, secrets. And God wants to tell us secrets. Jesus said to his disciples, "I have not called you servants, but I have called you friends," {John 15:15}. He said this in a context in which he was attempting to impart to them the secrets of life. Now God will do this, he wants to do it. This is what that wonderful word, fellowship, means. But it will be as you are able to bear these secrets. As you grow along with him you will discover that your eyes are continually being opened to things you never saw before. God will tell you secrets about yourself, about life, about others around you, about everything, imparting these to you because that is part of fellowship. That is what we are called to. The fellowship is based upon the relationship. You cannot have the fellowship until you first come to Christ and receive him. When you have the Son you are related to the Father, and when you are related to him, you can have fellowship with him.

3. Then, when you have fellowship, you have the third thing that John mentions. These things we are writing, he says, "that your joy may be full." I want to close on that note for that is where John closes his introduction, but I want to use a different term than joy. In some ways it is not as descriptive and accurate a term as joy, for joy is compounded of many things. Joy is an excellent word here, but perhaps it will be more helpful for us to understand what John means if we use the word, excitement. "That your excitement may be complete." Joy is a kind of quiet inner excitement and this is what results when we really experience the fellowship that John is talking about.

When we discover that God is actually using us, it is the most exciting and joy-producing experience possible to men. I have seen it happen many, many times. I have seen young people get so excited over this that they literally jump up and down. There is a dear girl in this congregation that cannot relate what

the Lord does without literally bouncing as she tells it. I have seen men, familiar with the world of high finance who work continually in the great marts of trade, get so excited over the fact that God was using them in some simple way that they literally trembled as they told it. I have known women who have discovered how exciting it is to have God at work in their neighborhood, using their kitchen, and their coffee pot, that they have not been able to sleep at night. They are overwrought with excitement, with joy. That is what John is talking about, life, as life was intended to be lived, filled with joy.

Oh yes, with many pressures! Do not make the mistake of thinking that the only way to have joy is to be free from pressures or problems. No, take all the pressures and the problems, but with them that wonderful feeling down inside that God is at work, and he is at work in you. You are a vital part of God's program. God is using you to do his eternal work. There is nothing more exciting than that. That is what John is writing about.

That is worth listening to, is it not?

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that thou will take our eyes that have been so befuddled by false concepts, superficial, childish, teddy-bear concepts of Christianity, and help us to see the truth. Make us to understand what these words are describing. Convey to us, Lord, something of the richness and the glory of this relationship of life in Jesus Christ, the warmth of fellowship with him when everything that we are is made available to him and we are experiencing all the wonderful joy of everything that he is made available to us. Teach us this in practice, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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God is Light

by Ray C. Stedman

We are continuing our studies of the great letter from the hand of the Apostle John – John the Mender – the man who was called to follow Christ as a teenager when he was mending his nets. That act became symbolic of the ministry of this man, the one who mends things, who calls us back to fundamental matters. As we saw in the last message, John began by presenting to us a life, a life which appeared in history in the form of a person, a person who was touched and seen and heard and handled. He was, therefore, no mere figment of the imagination. He was not an invented person, a composite of the longings and desires of men, projected by their wishful thinking upon a being who never really lived. He is a man who lived, and walked among us, John said. We touched him, we saw him, we heard him, we handled him.

The great and exciting message he has to declare to us is that there is a way to share this wonderful life today. There is a way that you can have this person, and he can have you, and the two of you can live together. When you do, John says, you will experience two wonderful things:

First, fellowship: The experience of having everything in common, with all that means in view of the One with whom you are sharing life, One who is God himself, dwelling in you. This, in turn, will result in joy – that secret, quiet excitement within that is not subject to circumstances, but burns like a steady flame, keeping life interesting, free from boredom, lending richness and color to every experience you go through. These are not just hopeful words, these are real facts. This is what John says he is writing to us about. All this will occur as we come to know this living Lord.

Now, going on, he says that this life was also a message. Jesus said, and is yet saying to the world,

a very badly needed thing; his life is a message. We know how a man's life can become a single message.

The life of Adolf Hitler, for instance, has become a message to the world, a message which all have read, how pride, pursued to the full, opens the door to demonic powers, and terrible, frightening things can follow.

In contrast to that, I have just read the life of that amazing American, George Washington Carver, the dedicated Negro scientist who, though born into slavery, became one of the greatest scientists this nation has ever produced and whose discoveries have blessed the whole world. What is the message of his life? It is that true humility is the open door to learning. If you are humble enough there is nothing you cannot learn. It is exactly the opposite of the message of Adolf Hitler.

Now the whole life of Jesus Christ is also a message. What was the message? John goes on to tell us in one verse:

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. {1 Jn 1:5 RSV}

That is the message of the life of Jesus. That is what he came to tell us, and what he imparts to us as we learn to know him. "God is light and in him is no darkness at all." It is put positively and negatively and it is easy to see how that message was incorporated and fulfilled in the life of Jesus. John opens his Gospel with the words: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in darkness, and the darkness can never put it out," {cf, John 1:4-5}. That is the glory of this life. Our Lord himself said, "I am the light of the world. If any man follow me, he shall not walk

in darkness but shall have the light of life,” {cf, John 8:12}. There it is again, a life that is light. Again, he said, “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world and men love darkness and will not come to the light because their deeds are evil,” {John 3:19 KJV}.

What, exactly, does this message mean, “God is light”? Obviously the Apostle John expects us to think about this a bit, for he says this is the sum, this is the meaning, of all that Jesus came to do and to be. It is imperative that we understand this, for this is the meaning of the life of Jesus, whether it is his life lived in history, or the life he will live in us right now. It will all come out here, “God is light and in him is no darkness at all.” Notice something else. John does not say, “Light is God.” It is, “God is light.” You cannot reverse that. If it were, “Light is God,” then, of course, the Indians who greet the rising sun with arms outstretched and burn incense to it are truer worshippers of God than we. No, it does not say “Light is God,” but “God is light.”

That means that what light is, on a physical plane, God is on every level of human experience. If you want to understand the character of God, then observe what light is. What light does, God does. What light accomplishes, God can accomplish in your life. Well, then, what does light do?

In this enlightened 20th century we feel we have learned a great deal about light, much more than men knew fifty or a hundred years ago. We have analyzed it, broken it down into its spectrum; we can take fractional parts of it and use them for various purposes; we have timed it, measured its speed; we know that it is the fastest thing known in the universe; we have managed to produce x-rays and laser beams which do amazing and phenomenal things. But after all this we have really learned nothing essentially new about light. That is the humiliating thing about it. We have not learned anything really important about it. The great functions of light are universally known and have been known ever since the beginning of history. In the earliest dawn of humanity men experienced what light could do as equally and fully as modern men do today. We have not learned one thing of any real importance.

Now what does light do? Basically, it is three-fold:

1. First, the most characteristic thing about light, the thing we are enjoying at this very moment and probably the first discoverable fact about light, is that light reveals. I can see you because there is light in this room; and you are unfortunate enough to see me for the same reason. Light reveals. If there were no light I could hear you but I could not see you. Darkness conceals, but light reveals.

A number of years ago I visited the Grand Canyon for the first time. I was driving alone from Texas to Southern California and on the way picked up two high school boys who were hitch-hiking. On the spur of the moment the three of us decided to leave Highway 66, and drive up to see the Grand Canyon. It was about ten-thirty at night when we made our decision and we knew we would have to spend the night somewhere. We were traveling on very limited funds for that is the way I traveled all the time in those days. We did not have money enough to stay in a motel, but since we had sleeping bags with us we decided to drive up inside the park, find a place to sleep, and see the Canyon in the morning. We arrived in the park long after midnight and not knowing where the Canyon was we drove on into the park, found a wide spot in the road, pulled the car over. Taking out our sleeping bags we walked a few feet into the trees, threw them down and went to sleep. When we awoke in the morning the sun was high. I woke first, rolled over, and to my astonishment found that I had been sleeping within arm's length of the edge of the canyon. If I had rolled over in my sleep I would have fallen over the edge of a 500-foot precipice. In the darkness we had not seen it, but the light made it clear. That, in turn, made us grateful that we had not tried to go further from the car that night.

That is the first function of light. It enables us to see things that have been there all the time but which we could never see till the light shines. That is exactly what John means. God, also, does that. God reveals reality. God, through Christ, opens up the eyes of the heart and life comes into focus and we see clearly, without distortion. It does not all happen in one amazing transformation. Often, it is a gradual process for we would not be able to take the full revelation at once. But the

purpose of God's entering into human hearts is that we might see reality. Light reveals, and so does God. The enigmas of life will gradually unfold, the great mysteries will become clear, illusions will be seen for what they are, deceiving phantasmata that disappear as the light shines upon them.

This time of the year always makes me remember the days when, as a young man, I was entering college for the first time. That was a critical period in my life. Like so many young men facing college, I was not at all sure about what I was getting into. I had an outward appearance of confidence and the ability to handle anything that came, but within I had a deep sense of uncertainty. I was aware that I really did not know the ground rules of life. I pretended I did but I didn't, and inside I knew it. It was like trying to play a game when you didn't know the rules, but were trying to guess them as you went along. It was rough. I was baffled, as all young people are baffled, by the great questions of life. What am I here for? What is it really all about? What really is worthwhile about life, and how do you tell? How do you fit death into this whole picture? How can I understand and control myself so as to handle rightly what comes? The more I learned about life the more baffled I became until I met Jesus Christ and began to understand the message of his life, the message revealed in his Word. Bit by bit things began to come clear. First the answers to some of the greater issues: What is life all about? What happens after death? Where do we go from here? Then details began to filter through the fog and little by little things became much clearer. I confess to you that much remains, but I am no longer confused. The road ahead is clear.

Out of my darkness one fact became increasingly clearer to me. A great mystery was cleared up that impinged upon every other question of my life. I discovered that it was the key to many things. It was the fact that the solution to most of my troubles lay within me. The problems were not outside of me, as I once thought – the way other people acted – but it was me. I was the big problem. As I began to see that, I saw what it was in me that was creating the problems. Little by little I began

to understand myself. The mystery of self was revealed by the light as it shone upon me from the word of the only One who knows what is in man. I began then, to see the answers to the problems of life.

A friend and I were talking this past week about President Johnson. We were discussing the phenomenon of a man who is obviously an able individual, who has had a great deal of experience in running governmental affairs, perhaps more so than any other President before him, but who is increasingly losing popular standing and is increasingly baffled by the fact that he cannot put his finger on the solution to his problems. It occurred to us, as we were talking, that the reason was because he cannot see himself. President Johnson is the kind of man who interjects himself into every problem. Then he no longer sees it as a problem outside himself but his primary interest is how it relates to him, what it is going to do to him and to his image. Because of that he can no longer see it objectively. He plants himself squarely in the midst of every problem, and since he does not understand himself and cannot see himself, he cannot understand why he cannot solve his problems. The increasing bafflement of the President's life is continuous testimony to this.

I only mention him because he is so well known, but many of us suffer from this, do we not? There is some undefinable, unknown factor in our problems that eludes us. We cannot get our fingers on whatever it is that makes everything turn out so differently than we expect. That always indicates that we, ourselves, are the problem. We need the light to shine upon the mystery of darkness in our own lives. That is what God does. God is light and light reveals.

2. But that is not light's only quality. It also measures.

Did you ever watch a man pick up a stick of lumber, hold it up, and sight along it? What is he doing? He is trying to see if it is crooked or not. What reveals that? A beam of light. He is measuring it against a ray of light, because light is straight and anything that does not correspond to the light is crooked. Light is the most common measuring stick in the

universe. We measure whether things are straight or crooked by light. Surveyors use light to measure distances and angles, to see whether they are up or down, high or low, right or left. They have a little instrument they sight through with a small telescope on it. How does it work? It uses light as a measurement. In the vast, illimitable reaches of space today the only adequate measuring stick is light years, the distance measured by the speed of light.

That is what light does, and that is what God does. God is a measuring stick, a point of reference. You can use God to measure everything else. Men are forever seeking to solve the puzzles of life on every level around us. In economic life, political life, social life, scientific life, psychological life, whatever it may be, we are confronted with mysteries and puzzles wherever we turn. As men seek to ferret out the solutions to these puzzles they come up with many proposed solutions. Some are contradictory, some are supplementary to each other, some are absurd, some are stupid, some are very appealing and practical. Every one of us, facing this welter of advice, are constantly asking ourselves the question, how do I know which one is right? How do I know who has the real answers? Where do I get a measuring stick that can be applied to these voices I hear? That is where God comes in.

I'm now reading a very interesting book on the great economic philosophers of the past, men who have analyzed the social and economic structure of life and have tried to explain what happens to the market that makes it rise and fall and thus men lose their shirts or become rich overnight. It discusses the theories of men like Adam Smith, Karl Marx, John Keynes and others. It is an interesting book because it reveals that no one can really put their finger on the secret of economic management in society. The reason is that none of the thinkers sees man as God sees him. None of them sees man as he is. Each of them approach the matter on one plane or another but they do not see man in the totality of his being, and therefore they miss the point. But God sees man according to the truth, according to the light and all the conflicting voices that we hear today can be sorted out and measured by his revelation of what man is.

Now that is very practical. Is your marriage working out? Do you get all kinds of advice on how to make it work? Well, the light that shines from God's word about marriage is the full truth about what makes marriages work. If you measure the advice you get by that, you can see what to believe. It is the only measure there is. When you fall in love with another woman or another man, and your own home looks dull and hopeless, and you are drawn by the temptation to forget it all and run off with the other person and start all over again, because it all looks so lusciously attractive. But then you measure it against God's Word and there you learn the unpleasant truth that may be quite unpalatable to you at the moment, that your dream will not work, it will only increase your misery, it will hurt and destroy everyone involved. Because you see that and have learned to trust the light a bit, you say "All right, even though I want to do this, I won't." Later on, the blindness passes and you are so grateful, so eternally thankful, that God's light stopped you from going on into darkness. "The light shines in darkness," John says, "and the darkness cannot put it out," {John 1:5 RSV}.

3. Light not only reveals and measures, but light energizes too. That is the most dramatic quality about light. It imparts life, it activates, it quickens. Some years ago I ran across a most eloquent description in one of the sermons of Philip Brookes along this line. He says,

"When the sun rose this morning it found the world in darkness, torpid and heavy and asleep, with powers all wrapped up in sluggishness; with life that was hardly better or more alive than death.

"The sun found this great sleeping world and woke it. It bade it to be itself. It quickened every slow and sluggish faculty. It called to the dull streams and said, 'Be quick;' to the dull birds and bade them sing; to the dull fields and made them grow; to the dull men and bade them think and talk and work.

"It flashed electric invitations to the whole mass of sleeping power which really was the world and summoned it to

action. It did not make the world. It did not start another set of processes unlike those which had been sluggishly moving in the darkness. It poured strength into the essential processes which belonged to the very nature of the earth. It glorified, intensified, fulfilled the earth.”

That happens every morning. That is what God does. God is light and God intensifies, fulfills, and glorifies our essential humanity. He does not destroy it. He takes it and leads it on through the darkness into an ever-growing experience of life and vitality and productivity. Many all over the earth have lost this vision, and for them life has become dead and dull and meaningless, filled with increasing despair. I recently read an excerpt from one of the papers of Frankfurt, Germany, and this sentence stood out:

“Newspapers and reports are mentioning the phenomenon of the beatnik which is spreading throughout all European countries. Young people, whose life consists of idleness and complete senselessness. They are lying for hours – as dead persons – in the parks and public places. One of them summarizes the content of his life as follows: ‘Eat every day, evacuate your bowels every day, go to bed every day. That’s all.’”

That kind of a low-voltage substitute for life cries out for light, and God is light. We all recall the testimony of a young man in our midst who was trained as a scientist and had an exciting job exploring the frontiers of the universe with radio telescopes, but his life was empty, hollow, dead, unattractive. Then the light came and he found Christ. Now his life is filled with constant excitement and he is a challenge to young people up and down the whole of the West Coast. God is greatly using

him to convey to others that electric sense of vitality that has come from knowing Christ.

Right here at this point someone asks the often unspoken question, “All right, I grant you this happens to a few, but why only to a few? What’s the matter with the rest of the Christians? Why is it that all Christians are not this way? Why are they not alert and informed, stable and dependable, alive and attractive? Why is it that the Christians I meet are so untrustworthy, so critical, so harsh, repelling, and negative? If God is light and he can do this, why does it only seem to happen to a few?”

That is the question the world is asking, is it not? And that is right where John begins next. He goes on to point out that which will be the subject of our examination in several messages; three conditions that are like umbrellas that we Christians erect to shut out the healing, cleansing, glorifying, fulfilling light so that though it is shining it does not change us. Those three conditions will be very revealing to some. God is light and he does reveal truth, he does measure life, he does give us a reference point by which the false can be separated from the true. Best of all, he fulfills, he glorifies, he energizes, he vitalizes. But he does so only as we learn to take down the umbrellas that hide the light from us.

Prayer:

Our Father, we ask that you will grant to us the ability to walk in the light. You who are the Great Light, shining upon our darkened lives, break through the darkness and teach us how to become the kind of persons

you intended us to be, responding to the light like plants seeking the sun, opening, unfolding, bearing fruit for your name’s sake. We ask in Christ’s name, Amen.

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The Man who Ignores Light

by Ray C. Stedman

We have learned from the Apostle John that life without fellowship with God is like being shut away from the light; it is dark and cold, depressing and filled with illusions. God is light. This is the message of the life of our Lord Jesus, John declares. This is what he came to tell us and to show us. As light, he warms, fills, and fulfills us and unveils reality to us by showing up the false.

But, evidently, not to everyone. This is the problem which we now must face. Why is it that some Christians seem to be transformed by contact with Jesus Christ – their lives are perceptibly different – but others are not? Some Christians, even Christians of long standing, seem still to be very much conformed to the world around them, even deformed in their views and outlooks. Yet all of them stoutly assert that they are Christians, that they, too, have been born again by faith in Jesus Christ. It is not strange that the world asks, “What is wrong, why is this condition true?”

The secret, John says, is fellowship. The reason he writes this letter is that we might understand that. Verse 3 tells us,

that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. {1 Jn 1:3 RSV}

So the key is fellowship. We must distinguish and understand very clearly the difference between relationship and fellowship. Relationship is becoming a member of the family of God, by faith in Jesus Christ. It is established by asking him to come into your life and heart. John makes that clear at the end of this letter. “He who has the Son has life [that is relationship]; but he who has not the Son of God has not life [he does not have a relationship],” {1 Jn 5:12 RSV}. The Christian

life starts right there with this matter of relationship. But fellowship is experiencing Christ. Relationship is accepting Christ; fellowship is experiencing him. You can never have fellowship until you have established relationship, but you can certainly have relationship without fellowship. This is what this letter emphasizes for us. Relationship puts us into the family of God, but fellowship permits the life of that family to shine out through us. That is what marks the difference between Christians. Relationship is to be “in the Lord” but fellowship is to be “strong in the Lord and in the power of his might” {Eph 6:10 KJV}, as Paul so beautifully expresses it in his letter to the Ephesians.

Relationship means that all God has is potentially yours, but fellowship means you are actually drawing upon that, and his resources are visible in your experience. Relationship is you possessing God; fellowship is God possessing you. Fellowship, then, is the key to vital Christianity. That is why this letter, which calls us back to fundamental issues, focuses first on that. The important question is, as a Christian, are you enjoying fellowship with the Father and with his Son, experiencing all things in common together?

Now John sees three ways by which Christians miss out on fellowship. If you look at the first chapter of John’s letter, you will see three times he uses the phrase, *if we say*:

Verse 6: “If we say we have fellowship,”
Verse 8: “If we say we have no sin,” and
Verse 10: “If we say we have not sinned.”

Three times a profession is indicated, but the condition or possession that follows belies the profession. We shall spend our time now with that

first one, taking these one by one because they are so important.

In this first instance, John says,

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; 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. {1 Jn 1:6-7 RSV}

What is the problem here?

This is a very common condition. Perhaps many of us here are suffering from this very condition at the present moment. Here is a Christian, John says, who has established a relationship with God, he has come into the family of God by faith in Christ. Perhaps that relationship has actually been established for years. The man has been a Christian for a long time and he says that he has fellowship with God. That means that he is experiencing the full flow of the life in the Spirit, the life of God. He claims that the life of Jesus Christ is his in experience as well as in potential. "Ah, but," John says, "there is no sign of it in his life." He lies. He does not live in a way that accords with his claim. He does not live according to the truth. His life is harsh, perhaps, and loveless, critical and demanding of others. Or perhaps it is intemperate, frivolous and flippant, lived solely on the surface, shallow and superficial. Or perhaps it is gossipy and sharp-tongued, or resentful and filled with bitterness.

Well, what is wrong?

Nothing is wrong with the relationship. It is no good talking to this person about *becoming* a Christian; he *is* a Christian. He knows what it means to know Jesus Christ. Well, what is wrong? John analyzes it. "The problem is," he says, "he is walking in darkness." Do we not greatly misunderstand this phrase? Most of us mentally read this as though it refers to having fallen into sin, what was once called 'a backslidden condition,' to having turned aside into willfulness, or wickedness. It is the opposite, of course, of walking in the light. The opposite of that would be walking in darkness, that is, not behaving the way we ought. But if we view this phrase that way we are confusing cause with results. The fact is, we sin because we are walking in darkness! Walking in darkness is not an equivalent term to sinning.

We are sinning because we walk in darkness. That is the problem.

Well, then, what is darkness?

We must answer that first on the physical level. How would you go about getting this room dark? It is now filled with light. Would you somehow have to scoop out the light and shovel in the darkness? Of course not, we need only to turn off the light. Darkness is simply the absence of light. Wherever there is no light there is darkness, because darkness is the absence of light. That is precisely what John means here. To walk in darkness means to walk as though there were no God, for God is light. It is to be a practical atheist. Not an actual one, of course. We believe there is a God, we know he exists, but we live as though there were none. We do not expose ourselves to him. That is walking in darkness.

This is what John is describing here. It is possible to be a Christian and yet walk in darkness by turning God off. When you turn off the light the darkness comes flooding in, instantly. As I suggested, this is not a rare condition at all. John starts with this problem because it is one of the most wide-spread and commonplace of problems. It is evident on every side. You can miss the benefits of God's presence in your heart and life by ignoring the light. This is the case he brings before us.

How do you do this?

I wish to be very practical about this. I have discovered that sometimes these biblical terms are so familiar to us they fall on our ears without meaning. We really do not know what they describe, and, therefore, it is sometimes very helpful to put them in other ways. How, then, do people actually do this, turn off the light and walk in darkness? Well, there are some very obvious ways in which it is done.

1. Some people stop coming to church. That is one way. The Word of God, if it is proclaimed from a pulpit like this, is a channel of God's light. The Word itself is light. It penetrates and searches, it seeks out our inner life and exposes it to our view. If we stop coming to church we escape the light that way. We are no longer made uncomfortable by the Word. We discover that, if we stay away, we do not experience the pricking of our

conscience which the light awakens. The writer of Hebrews warns us that there would be a tendency to do this as we draw near the close of the age. He says, "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is, and all the more as you see the Day approaching," {cf, Heb 10:25 KJV}. The delusions of the age are such that they tend to make us want to stay away from the light. It is more comfortable to sit around in the old slippers of the flesh and enjoy oneself at home. That is one way to turn off the light.

2. Another way is to stop reading the Scriptures. There are many who do this. An amazing number of Christians have simply turned off the light by ceasing to read the Scriptures. They seldom open the Bible. They only hear a verse now and then, and are content with what they get in church or Sunday School, but they seldom open it for themselves. Underneath all the excuses that are given for this – no time, lots of pressures, etc., – there is really a desire to escape the light. The Word is light, but we want to walk in darkness. As Mark Twain put it, "It isn't the parts of Scripture that I don't understand that bother me, it's the parts I do!"
3. Now there are other, more subtle ways, to walk in darkness. One is never to take a long look at yourself. Never examine yourself. Nod your head at the right places when the sermon is being expounded, but never apply it, or ask questions of yourself about what is being said. This is an almost certain way of walking in the darkness, and one of the commonest evasions of our day. I would suggest to you that perhaps the greatest cause of weakness among evangelical Christians is this, we seldom stop to examine ourselves. We never ask ourselves searching questions as to where we are in the Christian life. The Apostle Paul says, "Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith!" {2 Cor 13:5 KJV}. He urges this kind of activity upon us. He says, in effect, don't go on taking it for

granted that because you are hearing the truth you are obeying it, ask yourself, "Where am I?" John says, "try the spirits whether they be of God," {1 Jn 4:1 KJV}. Examine what you are listening to and how you are thinking, and lay it alongside the Scriptures. Put to yourself life's most basic question: "Where am I?" Do it periodically and frequently:

- What kind of Christian am I?
- Am I better than I was six months ago?
- Am I easier to live with?
- Am I a more gracious, compassionate, outgoing kind of person than I was a year ago?

That is walking in the light, and to avoid it is to walk in darkness.

Put on what I call "moral cosmetics." Did you ever see a lady making up her face? She examines it first, and then she applies a bit of color here and a bit there, a touch of blue here and brown there, pats it and arranges it to make her face up as she would like it to be. This is a rather harmless matter when it occurs only with the physical, for the physical is somewhat remote from us, but the closer we get to the real us the more deadly this kind of a practice becomes. We can not only do it on the physical, but we can do it on the soulish and spiritual level as well. We make ourselves up, when we go out among others, into the kind of image we want them to believe we are. That practice is absolutely guaranteed to halt abruptly all Christian growth:

- If you appear to be mature when you are not, then you cannot be seen as needing anything.
- So, when you are out with other Christians, you must always appear that you already have everything.
 - ◆ You cannot listen,
 - ◆ You cannot really seek for anything yourself,
 - ◆ You cannot admit any need.

If you are already fully grown, of course, you cannot appear to need any food; and so you do not

grow. You cannot grow, and you will never grow. This is why the Lord Jesus said,

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled,”
{Matt 5:6 KJV}

This results in what the world likes to call ‘gamemanship’– games people play to keep from telling as little of the truth about themselves as they possibly can. And the great tragedy is that Christians go right along with it and adopt these clever little games, pretending to be something they are not.

Is it not very instructive that the first miracle of judgment in the New Testament occurred shortly after the Day of Pentecost when Ananias and Sapphira were judged for pretending to be what they were not, pretending to have a holiness that they did not actually possess? See how destructive this is. The Holy Spirit is trying to arrest our attention by that dramatic scene when these two fell down dead, thus indicating the deadliness of pretense.

Furthermore, this kind of pretense makes it impossible for you ever to help a younger Christian, even the younger Christians in your own home. They are helped by seeing you overcome the problems of life by the reaction of faith. If you do not admit there are problems, if you never talk about them or never appear to have them, then your image to them is simply one of achieved perfection, and it is the most discouraging thing they can ever run into.

A woman this summer took me aside and for two and a half hours poured into my ear a tragic tale. As a young Christian, she admired another Christian woman. This woman appeared to her to be the acme of Christian perfection. She longed to be like her, but she confessed that whenever she was with her she came away totally depressed. She found the standard apparently set before her was impossible for her to achieve in her immature Christian relationship. But one day she discovered a terribly serious flaw in the other person, who immediately tried to cover it up. All the delusions of years came crashing down around this young woman’s head. She realized that the other had been pretending all the time. It resulted in a terrible crisis in the first person’s experience. She was overwhelmed with feelings of bitterness and

resentment, and cried out to me, “Oh, if she had just admitted some need, what a help it would have been to me!”

One of the most serious problems among Christians is that we never admit that anything is going wrong, or that we have problems, or times when our faith is tested. We never tell anyone about these. Therefore we walk in darkness.

Remember that darkness is the absence of light. To walk in the light is to have everything open, exposed to God, or to anyone else that is interested. But to walk in darkness is to talk about love and joy and power, but to live a lie. It is from fellowship, the sharing of the life of Christ, that there comes strength. To ignore light is to choose weakness.

Now what is the answer?

John says, “walk in the light,” that is the answer. In other words, not behaving perfectly, but examining ourselves, being willing to look at ourselves, listen seriously to what others say about us and ask ourselves how much truth is there in it, and not immediately grow defensive. If we take down our fences and our facades and open up to others, tell them what we are going through and encourage them to open up to us, admit our faults, this is walking in the light. As James puts it, “confess your faults, and pray one for another,” {cf, Jas 5:16 KJV}.

If we share these and ask for prayer about them, well, then what? John says, “you have fellowship one with another,” you and Christ. You immediately have fellowship, that is the important thing, is it not? You immediately discover that when you are willing to look, to listen, and to examine, that the light is shining on you. If you walk in the light it does not matter what your actual condition is, immediately you will have fellowship with the Son of God. You hold everything in common with him. What that can mean in terms of power, love, joy, glory and excitement in your life, you need only to listen to the testimony of those who are experiencing it to know.

But not only that, John says, our fellowship is also with one another. Fellowship with other humans will surely follow. In other words, you become approachable, sympathetic, and uncritical. You lose your blaming, demanding, critical spirit. You give up your perfectionism, your demand that everyone else measure up. You become human, and oh, so much easier to live with.

But that is not all. There is more, and it goes much deeper. Listen to this, “and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” Why does he put that in there? Is it not extraneous? Is not that introducing some other idea into this? We have been talking about fellowship and now suddenly he talks about cleansing. Well, of course, it is not out of place. Nothing in God’s Word is out of place. This belongs right here because the inevitable accompaniment of evading light is guilt. You cannot walk in darkness without being guilty, feeling guilty. Guilt is the underlying cause of Christian depression; it is the thing that creates that somber, wet-blanket approach that so many Christians demonstrate. It is because they are suffering from suppressed guilt and they are trying to make up for it in a rigid, demanding code to sort of punish themselves for not being what they know they ought to be. And it also results, as we have seen before in other messages, in actual physical afflictions, such as insomnia, obesity, nervous habits, and even in asthma, and ulcers, aphasia, and other afflictions.

You see, to walk in the light means to hide nothing, to defend yourself neither from the light of God nor in any way try to appear something that you are not. It means to come instantly, without defensiveness, to the light and deal with it before God. If you see something wrong, say so. You are not going to lose face. You are not going to lose status. You discover the amazing thing is your friends still love you. In fact, they love you more when you begin to admit there are things wrong. You will discover that you are far more approachable, far more human. Your family begins to be comfortable around you instead of being uncomfortable. And there comes the sweet relief of the cleansing grace of God that always accompanies walking in the light. It is almost automatic. If we walk in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ is continuously cleansing us from all sin. It is the present tense there, it is done instantly, continuously, all the time.

You could walk through a great dark cloud of soot, and if it were dark enough and thick enough you would come out completely covered with black, face, hands, everything, except for two spots that would be clear – your eyeballs. Why? Because your body has a continuous cleansing action that goes on all the time that keeps the eyes

clear. And this is the provision God has made in Christ.

If we walk in the light, if we try to deceive ourselves and play games, pretending we are something we are not, the blood of Jesus Christ is continually cleansing us so that the problems of the immediate past as well as the distant past are taken care of in the cleansing, forgiving grace accomplished in the death of Jesus Christ, the blood of Christ poured out for us.

Now, many have confessed to me that they have been Christians for years, they knew they were Christians, they knew they had a relationship, but they never experienced fellowship, because they had been walking in darkness. They had been doing some of these things we have talked about. But, oh, I have a long list of memories of those who have come to me and said,

“What joy, what relief, what sheer, dramatic relief it has been to get rid of all this posturing, this pretending, and admit they have problems, and to have people pray for them even though they have been Christians for years, and to feel the burden of pretense roll away so that they are just free to be what they are.”

It is a glorious sense, the cleansing grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, that is the first area, walking in the light. Light, as we saw, is:

1. First, revealing, and then
2. It is a measuring stick by which we can measure and evaluate.
3. And, finally, it is energizing, vitalizing, imparting strength to us.

But it must always be confronted first on that matter of revealing. Let the light shine on you. Listen to the voice of the Spirit. Do not hide, come out into the open with others as well as with God, and the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, will cleanse you from all sin, and you will know the glory of the intended life for a Christian – fellowship, shared life with the Son of God.

Let us bow together in prayer.

Prayer:

Our Father, You who know us so well, know how easy it is for us to pretend. What accomplished hypocrites we are; how practiced we are in these simple arts of deception. We have grown up this way. The world around lives on this level, and

we have too. But grant to us the faith and the grace to be different, for your name's sake and for your Word's sake, and come to the light pretending nothing, to take down our fences, and be what we are, and know that in that we become the fulfillment of all that we desire to be. We lose this pretended status and achieve a rightful one. Thank you in Christ's name, Amen.

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The Man who Denies Sin

by Ray C. Stedman

We are now experiencing the unique ministry of John the Mender, the apostle whose particular function it was to call men back to fundamentals. This was foreseen, in figure, in the act John was performing when he was called by Christ, for he was found mending his nets. The ministry of a mender is very much needed in any hour of weakness and attack. This is why the Holy Spirit chose the Apostle John to be the last writer of Scripture. His writings came at a time when the Church had begun to be infiltrated by various false concepts and ideas, and strong persecution had arisen.

John lived in the reign of Domitian, the Roman emperor whose cruelties exceeded all those before him, including even the infamous Nero. The church was under great attack, not only from the violence of a direct and frontal attack on it by the Roman Empire, but also from the subtle and much more dangerous attacks of various ideas which had arisen.

Now you will recognize that we live in the same kind of a day. Today much of the Christian church is under direct and frontal attack. Here in America we are free from that, and we ought to give thanks every day for our freedom, but here we are exposed to a very powerful barrage of attack by many devious errors that exist today. The Christian faith is threatened with a very subtle undermining that removes all vestiges of vital Christianity, leaving us dull, dead, and useless. So this letter of John's has tremendous significance for us.

John is writing to Christians and pointing out that their great need is fellowship with Jesus Christ, i.e., to hold all things in common with him. Not just to talk about it – he makes that point clear. It is so easy to say we have fellowship but what is needed is to really have fellowship, actually enter into the experience of having all our resources in

common with him, and all his resources in common with us. In other words, it is to turn from a reliance upon methods and propaganda, programs, and pronouncements unto power; to discover again the power of genuine Christianity.

We have looked enough at this letter of John's to know that fellowship is not an automatic thing. Simply because you are a Christian does not mean that you have fellowship with Christ. That needs to be made clear, for there are many who feel that it is almost automatic, and they take it for granted. But there is a key to fellowship, and the key, as John is reminding us, is to walk in the light. "If we walk in the light we have fellowship, one with another" {1 Jn 1:7 RSV}, i.e., with Jesus Christ and with one another as well.

Walking in the light, as we have already seen, means to see and treat things exactly as the light reveals them to be. Suppose you and I were in this room with the lights out and it was dark outside and we had never been here before. It would be quite likely that moving around in the room, stumbling over pieces of furniture, we might mistake the character of them. We might think the piano was a table, or the organ was a piano. This would be understandable in view of the absence of light. But once the light comes on, we would be stupid morons if we went on calling the piano a table and the organ a piano. The light reveals them for what they are, and to walk in the light is to call things what the light reveals them to be.

Now, the Apostle John simply applies this to life. He says God is light and to walk with him in the light of his Word is to see life as it really is. Well, then, act accordingly: That is walking in the light. Adjust yourselves to what you see. Treat things realistically. That is walking in the light. Openness, honesty, and obedience, these are the characteristics of walking in the light. This is the key to fellowship, and fellowship is the key to the

enjoyment and glory of vital Christianity. So it is exceedingly important that we understand what this means.

The apostle now points out that there are three ways by which, traditionally and continuously, we avoid walking in the light. We have already looked at one, the tendency to avoid light, to refuse to look at what it reveals, i.e., never to examine ourselves. This is the unexamined life, and even Plato says that an unexamined life is a life not worth living. The need for Christians these days is to examine themselves in view of what they see in the light.

But now we shall look at a second thing which will keep us from walking in the light and thus miss out on fellowship. It is given in Verses 8 and 9 of Chapter 1:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. {1 Jn 1:8-9 RSV}

It is necessary that we note first the difference between the words, *sin* and *sins*. In Verse 8 it is in the singular number, "If we say we have no sin," in Verse 9 it is plural, "If we confess our sins." Now this marks a very important distinction, the distinction between the root which is *sin*, singular, and the fruit, which are *sins*, plural. Sin is that fallen twist in man which makes him want to play God on every occasion. We know how this is: We want the world to revolve around us, always to be the center of things. That self-centeredness is sin. It goes by other names as well – pride, selfishness, or independence. That is the root, the twist in human nature which makes us commit sins.

Sins, therefore, are those specific forms which this inward bent makes us take from time to time. They can cover a wide range of experience. There are many kinds of *sins*, but all from one root, *sin*.

This is now what John is zeroing in on. He says if we say we have no sin, that is, no capacity to commit sins, if we deny the very possibility of sins, then we deceive ourselves. Obviously, this is a worse case than the previous one. In the first instance, you remember, John says, "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the

truth" {1 Jn 1:6 RSV}, i.e., we are trying to deceive others and to some degree we often succeed. But if we say we have no ability to sin at all, we are only deceiving ourselves. Others are quite aware that we are lying to and deceiving ourselves. They are not fooled, it is we who are. That is always pathetic. The man who ignores the light deceives others, but seldom himself. He knows that he is not living as he ought, he knows he is ignoring light. But this one deceives himself. He actually believes that he can no longer sin, that there is no longer any possibility of evil in him.

You say, "Does this really happen? Are there people so deluded that they have come to the place where they really think they cannot sin?"

Unfortunately, we must say "Yes," it often happens in our day, and for several reasons. But whenever it happens, the one who makes this claim loses immediately that glorious *fellowship* which makes Christianity so vital and unforgettable. He loses his power, his influence, his vitality, and his effectiveness as a Christian. His life becomes lusterless, orthodox, dull, and deadening.

Now how does this happen? There are primarily three ways in which this occurs:

1. First, a Christian can become the victim of one of the cults which teach along this line. There are cults which deny the reality of sin, who say that sin is but "an error of mortal mind." Sin, they say, has no real existence, it is a mere figment of the imagination, and all that is necessary to deal with sin is to correct your thinking. You will recognize that this teaching is widespread. It is represented by groups such as Christian Science, the Unity School of Christianity, and Religious Science. Also, it is widespread in non-Christian religions such as Theosophy, Hinduism, and Buddhism. They teach this concept that sin does not really exist, it is merely in the mind. Truth exists, and good exists, but sin does not have objective reality.

Unfortunately there are many who are really Christians who have fallen into this trap and believe that sin merely calls for an adjustment in their thinking. But John says if you believe that, the truth is not in you, there is no light in you, for light is truth and truth is light. The truth as it is revealed in Jesus says quite differently. According to the word of the Lord, both directly from his own lips and

through the apostles that followed, the truth is that sin is a very objective reality. It does exist, it is always a present possibility. It finds its final expression in the great hosts of satanically-controlled beings who are at work in the world, as we have seen in previous series, influencing and controlling the thinking of men. Sin is personified in the person of the adversary, the devil, but it exists as a very powerful and persuasive factor in life. To treat it as though it is not there is but to practice self-deception and to become the victim of the saddest of delusions.

Sin does exist. There is nothing more pathetic than the person who denies the reality of sin.

It has always reminded me of the story of the young woman who was attending a meeting with older women. They were discussing the effects of prenatal influences upon a child, and some gave rather strange accounts of how, when they were carrying their babies they saw a red fire engine and the baby was born with a red blotch on the forehead, etc. This young woman said, "I don't believe all this. My mother told me that before I was born she dropped a whole pile of phonograph records and broke every one, but it didn't affect me, affect me, affect me."

So those who make this claim of being free from the universal taint of sin are constantly saying by their very lives that it did affect them, as it affects all.

Now that is the first classification, those who succumb to the false teaching of the cults.

2. Then there are those Christians — and very devout Christians, for the most part — who have come to believe that the root of sin with which they were born has been somehow eradicated. By the activity of the Holy Spirit in the outworking of their salvation, it has been completely torn out, lifted out, and they are freed from the root of sin. There are a considerable number of Christians who follow this teaching today. They group themselves in denominations that usually bear the name, *holiness*. They interpret sanctification as a digging out and eradicating of the root of sin. Often they even base this idea upon a verse here in First John. Many of them quote First

John 3:9: "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God."

We must admit that at first glance this looks like a confirmation of that view. I shall withhold the explanation of that verse until we come to it in the study of the passage, but suffice it to say now that it does not mean that the Christian's ability to sin is totally removed. But there are those who take it that way. Having gone through this wonderful experience of sanctification, and they are usually ready to describe it to you in the most glowing terms, they now say they have reached a place where they no longer sin. I am always reminded of the words of D. L. Moody when someone came up to him and told him that he had reached the place where he no longer sinned. Mr. Moody, in his practical way, said, "Well, I'd like to ask your wife about that."

Quite a number of years ago, in Pasadena, I went into a barber shop one day to get a haircut because I had heard that the barber was a Christian. I sat down in the barber chair and he began his work. It was not long before I discovered that he was indeed a Christian, but he was a Christian of the holiness group, and that he personally believed that he had come to a place where he did not any longer have the possibility of sin. Now, unfortunately for him, I was that most knowledgeable of creatures, a seminary student in his second year, and we got into an argument that waxed hotter and hotter as it went along. Finally, he became so perturbed over our discussion that he began yelling and shouting at me and waving his fist in front of me, until another customer, waiting, got up in disgust and walked out. I felt that was quite an adequate commentary on the theology of the barber, for he was himself demonstrating the folly of his position.

Here again, those who do this are self-deceived. They walk in the darkness and therefore they are without fellowship, for the key to fellowship with Christ is to walk in the light. If you have reached the place where you say there is nothing for the light to reveal anymore, all sin is taken away, there is nothing to look at anymore, then, of course, you are deceiving yourself and walk in darkness and it always results in loss of fellowship.

3. Now there is a third classification, even more subtle, but perhaps more widespread, that occurs among the best instructed Christians, those who have learned that there is a possibility of being free from sin by walking in the Spirit. They have fully grasped the implications of the great verse in Galatians that says, “if we walk in the Spirit we shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh,” {Gal 5:16 KJV}. They are aware of the mighty possibilities for freedom from the control and power of sin and they enter into this with all their heart. They give themselves diligently to understanding how to walk in the Spirit in every circumstance until they believe that they have so mastered the process of being free from sin that they invariably fulfill it; therefore, they do not, and even cannot, sin.

It seems a perfectly logical position to take, does it not?

Theoretically it is possible, for any given period of time, to so walk in the Spirit that we are free from sin, we do not sin. This is the whole purpose of salvation in its present tense. When we manifest the life of the Spirit, we do not sin. This is true. But the remarkable thing is that, as you read the pages of the New Testament, you discover that no New Testament Christian ever makes a claim to sinless perfection. The only one who could say, and did say, that he was without sin was the Lord Jesus himself. All others are reminded that though we must face constantly the challenge of walking without sin, nevertheless, the subtlety of the enemy, the cleverness of the wiles of the devil, the ease by which we can deceive ourselves and be deceived, is so prevalent and powerful that there will be times when we succumb, times when we fail.

As Paul warns his readers, “He who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall,” {cf, 1 Cor 10:12}. This is why the Christian is always exhorted to walk in fear and trembling. As Paul writes again, “If any man thinks he knows something, he knows nothing as he ought to know it,” {cf, 1 Cor 8:2}. When we think we have come to the place where we have mastered the processes of walking in the Spirit, then we need to think again. We have not yet

learned it all. Even the Apostle Paul can say of himself at the close of his ministry that he regards himself as “the chief of sinners” {cf, 1 Tim 1:15}, not because he sees sin abounding in his life, but because as his conscience is sensitized his awareness of transgression multiplies. He is fully aware of the ease with which he can fall into an attitude of mind that is contrary to the things of the Lord. He is aware of the fact that not until he stands in resurrection life with a redeemed body will he be totally free from the taint of sin. This is why our Lord himself taught in the great Lord’s Prayer that we are daily to pray, “Lord, lead me not into temptation,” {cf, Matt 6:13, Luke 11:4}. The pressures are so great, the opposing forces are so subtle, that it is easier to succumb.

Then let us not take this stand. If any man deny sin, if any man says he cannot sin, he deceives himself, and the truth is not in him. Then what is the remedy? Well, as we have been seeing all along, it is always the same thing. It is to walk in the light. It is to face reality. Specifically, as the apostle puts it, it is to confess our sins. Regardless of whether we have deluded ourselves into thinking there is no root sin in us anymore, it will still be there and it will keep on producing sins, and all the more if we think there is no need to guard against it. Well then, face the sins, John says. Take a good look at them and agree with God about them. The light reveals them to be there.

Remember the word of the Lord himself? “Out of the heart of man,” he says, “proceed murders, adulteries, fornications, evil thoughts, etc.” {cf, Matt 15:19, Mark 7:21}. All these things come from within. The root is still planted deep within our physical natures and we shall not escape it until the body is redeemed. Of course, we do not need to yield to it, that is the point of redemption. As we learn to walk in the Spirit there can be great, protracted periods of time when we walk free from the taint of sin. Ah, but when we do sin, do not try to hide it, do not cover it over, do not, out of some mistaken notion that you will lower yourself in the estimation of someone else, refuse to acknowledge sin. Confess it, say what it is – anger, or malice, envy or lust, jealousy or selfishness or ambition – any of these things. Do not deny them and do not

deny the root. Face the reality, the apostle says, confess these faults when they do appear.

Now the word *confess*, as you know, does not mean to ask for forgiveness, and you will see why in a moment. Christ's work for us upon the cross has already done all that is necessary to forgive us. What God wants us to do is to look at the sin before us and call it what he calls it. That means to agree with God about it, and that is what the word *confess* means: *Fess* comes from a root which means "to say," and *con* means "with." "To say with" God what he says about this thing, that is confessing sin. There is a popular song which you sometimes hear in Christian circles,

If I have wounded any soul today,
If I have caused one foot to go astray,
If I have lived in my own selfish way,
Dear Lord, forgive.

That is not a confession at all. The "*if*"s" take it out of the realm of confession. Do not say "*if*," say, "Lord, I have caused some foot to go astray, I have lived in my own selfish way." That is confession, that is agreeing with God.

When you agree with God about these things, what happens? Well, we are told,

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. {1 Jn 1:9 RSV}

Sometimes, I might add, there is need for confession to others besides God who are injured by what we do. There is need, often, for restitution. If we are honestly saying what God says about it, then we need to do something about it. We need to remedy the harm we have done as much as possible, and God will sometimes demand this of us. There is no sense of forgiveness granted to us until we have moved in restitution. Ah, but if we look at it as he does, then he says we are cleansed.

The cleansing is not based upon God's mercy, or his kindness, or his love, least of all his caprice; it is based on the work of Jesus Christ. On that basis God is faithful and just to forgive, and he would be utterly unjust if he refused to forgive a penitent sinner. God himself would be wicked if he refused, on the basis of the work of Christ, to forgive a penitent sinner. That is how certain we

can be of the cleansing that comes when we agree with God about these things.

Do you remember how our Lord himself dramatized this for us in the solemnity of that Last Supper, before he went to the cross? Gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room, he took a basin and a towel and girded himself and set about to wash the feet of the disciples. You recall, as he came to Peter, Peter shook his head and said, "No, Lord, you will never wash my feet," {cf, John 13:8a}. Jesus then said these significant words, "If I wash you not, you can have no part with me," {cf, John 13:8b}. Peter did not understand all he meant until years later, but we can see that what our Lord meant was, "Peter, here is the key to fellowship. You can be related to me by sharing my life, but you do not have any fellowship with me unless you let me wash you feet." "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me," {John 13:8b KJV}. Peter, in his impetuosity, always plunging himself to the full in everything said, "Lord, if that's the case, then wash me all over," {cf, John 13:9}. Again the Lord has to correct him. "No, Peter, he that is bathed does not need to wash again," {cf, John 13:10}. That first cleansing of redemption, that coming to Christ which washes away the guilt of the past, the Adamic guilt, that is "bathing all over." Jesus said he that is so bathed does not need to wash all over again, but he does need to wash his feet. This is what John is talking about – this repeated washing of the feet.

Whenever we are aware of having fallen into a fleshly reaction, into sins, then let us stop right there and in our hearts before God agree with God about it and experience anew this wonderful cleansing, this faithful and righteous cleansing of our lives, "cleansing from all unrighteousness." That is keeping the feet clean.

Do you know what happens when you do not keep your feet clean? You become very unpleasant to live with. As a schoolboy in Montana I endured many bitter Montana winters when the temperature would sometimes go down to 60 degrees below zero for a week at a time. In those homes, where we had no running water, no indoor plumbing, and no electricity, taking a bath was relatively akin to major surgery. We had to go out and get the *c o l d*, galvanized iron washtub off the wall, bring it in, and put it on the kitchen floor, then pour heated water into it from the stove. Where the water touched it, the tub was hot, but where it

didn't, it was cold. In that painful setting, we performed our ablutions. It was difficult enough, and distressing enough, that some people did not think it necessary to bathe at all during the winter months. If you went into the heat of a one-room schoolhouse on a cold winter's day, with about 50 or 60 sweating bodies there, you became very much aware of this fact.

Now, I do not mind living with someone who thinks his feet get dirty and who therefore frequently washes them, but it is terribly distressing to live with someone who thinks his feet never get dirty!

That is what John is saying. If we say we cannot get dirty feet, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we face up to it, and confess it, and agree with God about it, (and that is sometimes hard to do because we want so desperately to get him to agree with us) well then, the cleansing that the Lord Jesus has fully and abundantly provided for on the cross is immediately ours, and we are as though we had never sinned.

Now let us thank God for that.

Prayer

Our Father, in what practical terms to these verses of Scripture reveal to us the tendency of our own heart to deceive ourselves, and also the readiness of your heart to cleanse us and to fit us for fellowship with the Lord Jesus, holding everything in common with him. What a tremendous thing this is. May we, by thy grace, understand it more and more, and understand ourselves better and better, until we learn to walk in fellowship, and in fear and trembling, knowing that the next moment our hearts can trick us into falling back into walking in darkness again. May we walk softly before thee, looking to you for cleansing love, in Christ's name, Amen.

The Man who Rationalizes Sin

by Ray C. Stedman

In this present series in the First Letter of John we are concerned with the great and pressing question of maintaining an intimate and, therefore, powerful and fruitful fellowship with the Son of God. It is fellowship which makes Christian life vital, compelling, effective, and worth the living.

We have seen before that there are two ties we may have with Christ: There is the matter of relationship which is established by the response of our faith to the invitation of his Word. You come to know Jesus Christ by coming to him. He puts it on that basis. "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest," {cf, Matt 11:28}. "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink; out of his innermost being will flow rivers of living water," {cf, John 7:37-38}. That establishes relationship. It makes you one with Christ and opens the possibility of gaining all that he is in your experience. But fellowship, as John is making clear in this first letter, is the actual experience of his power and wisdom, his love and life at work in you. It is actually to come into a day-by-day experience of Christ working, living, and manifesting himself through you. There is nothing more exciting than that! And this experience of fellowship is continually yours if you live honestly before God and call the reactions of your life what God calls them, shunning all pretense and deceit. In other words, walking in the light is the secret of fellowship. Fellowship is the secret of power, and walking in the light is the secret of fellowship.

Now it sounds easy to do, does it not? Just to be open, to be honest, to not kid ourselves, to cease pretending to be something we are not; then all that God is, is available to us and we can live as God intended man to live in the fullness of fellowship, having all things in common with him. I do not suppose there is one of us here today who would

not readily subscribe to the necessity of being honest, but when it comes to translating it into practical living it is sometimes difficult to do.

The reason it is difficult is threefold. John goes right on to point out three very common conditions or practices which we employ to shut off the light of God that is shining upon us, in Christ, and thus cut us off from the fellowship of the Son of God and from fellowship with each other as well. For, as we are learning, we must all live in a vertical and horizontal relationship. If the vertical relationship is wrong, the horizontal one will be wrong. So frequently we get concerned about this horizontal relationship (our contacts with other people), and try to correct them on that level, but they are never correctable there, they can be changed only when the vertical is right. That is why John stresses this matter of fellowship so much.

There are only three kinds of conditions that can cut off fellowship. John has listed them for us here. Every failure in fellowship is explained right here in this first chapter of John's letter. If we are having difficulty experiencing all that is promised to us in the Scriptures, we shall find the reason for it here in these three practices. We have already looked at two of them:

1. First, there is the man who ignores light, i.e., the one who never stops to look at what the light reveals. The light of God, expressed in God's Word, is always shining on us. But far too frequently we never stop to look at what it reveals, we never examine ourselves. We have already seen this. We avoid the channels of light, such as the Word of God. We never read it. We avoid fellowship with other Christians, or at least contact with them too closely, for such contact can be a channel of light. We

avoid coming to church, since that, too, is a channel of light. We do not like having the light. We do not like having the light turned on and we try to walk through life never stopping to look at ourselves. That is an exceedingly dangerous position and one that always produces weakness.

2. Now, we saw also that there is a group of people who persistently deny the need for light, who believe that the possibility of sin has been removed, that they have advanced so far in the Christian experience that they can no longer sin, therefore they do not need light. This is, as you will recognize, an extreme form of self-righteousness, which John immediately labels self-delusion. Such are kidding themselves. We do not reach the place of perfect sinlessness in this life, and if we think we have, then we are simply walking in darkness, and therefore, walking in weakness.
3. Now, today, we come to the third of these conditions, the case of the man who rationalizes the sin which the light reveals.

It is described for us in Chapter 1, Verse 10, and, ignoring the chapter break, the first two verses of Chapter 2:

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. {1 Jn 1:10-2:2 RSV}

Here is the man who rationalizes sin. I do not hesitate to say that this is the commonest failure in Christian experience – to rationalize sin.

In the first case we referred to, the man does not like what the light reveals so he keeps himself too busy ever to see it. In the second case, the person says there is no need for light because, he says, I cannot sin, therefore I shall just go on living the Christian life as I see it, since there is an automatic something in me that keeps me from falling into sin. But in this third case, the person is saying, “Of course, I *can* sin as a Christian, I know

this. I do need light. But when I stop to look at my life, and examine myself, what I *see* is not sin. Weakness and failure perhaps, but not sin. I may have to admit that I have been weak, but I have not sinned.” Now, that is what John means: “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

Essentially this is an evasion of fact, an evasion of reality. It is the exercise of that terrible power of the human mind which we call rationalization, the ability to clothe wrong so that it looks right, and evil so that it looks good. Who of us has not experienced this? We are all experts at it. We know well how to invent reasons to do what we want to do, and invent equally valid-sounding reasons to avoid what we want to avoid, and all the time make it sound as though there is really nothing we can do about it. There are perfectly understandable circumstances that keep us from doing these things. That is rationalization.

Someone handed me this week a comment by Richard DeHaan on the great electrical blackout in the New England states that occurred last year. Very few people realize that in England a very similar thing was occurring at the same time, but on a much more limited scale. The difference was that in the United States, we were calling it “a power failure,” in England they called it “a power reduction.” Well, it was a reduction, all right, all the way down to zero! But it illustrates the tendency we have, even in non-religious things, to tone down a word.

We do that with the word, *sin*. Many people really do not know what the word means, but all of us have an uncomfortable feeling about it. We know that it suggests something bad and we do not like to use it about ourselves. So we have invented a lot of very fancy names for it. What the Scripture would call sin, we call human frailty, or bad tendencies, or simply weakness, or a hereditary fault, or environmental kick-back. The fancier the name, the more we like it, because it sounds so much better than that simple, ugly, three-letter word, *sin*. Thus, one way of saying, “I have not sinned” is to rename it, and call it by a much pleasanter name. It is just as if you went through your medicine cabinet, took out all the bottles of poison and re-labeled them – perfume, hand lotion, etc. It does not change the character of the poison, but it does make it sound a lot better. The evil twist of our fallen natures is revealed in the fact

that what others do, we call sin, but when we do the same thing, we have a different name for it:

- Others have prejudices; we have convictions.
- Others are conceited; but we have self-respect.
- When another man is lazy, we say so; but when we do not want to do something, we say we are too busy.
- When someone else goes ahead and acts on his own, we say he is presumptuous; when we do the same thing, we have initiative.
- When someone else gets angry and blows up, we say he has lost his temper; but when we do that, we are merely showing righteous indignation.

And as long as we can find a nicer label we never will treat the thing like the poison it is.

Now, we laugh at these things, but these are the reasons why we are weak as Christians. As long as we laugh at them, we never will do anything about them. We say, "Oh well, everyone does it. It is so common, even the Christians at church all do it."

As long as we take that attitude we shall always be in the grip of evil. We will never treat these things as the poison they are, as long as we permit ourselves to paste on a label that says something different, and call it perfume. Also we will never understand why we still go around crippled and ailing and acting as though some poison were sapping the spiritual strength from our lives.

Another way we do this is to excuse our sins, because of the pressure of circumstances we are experiencing:

- We say it is nerves that causes us to speak impatiently to one another.
- We say it is tiredness, fatigue, that makes us utter sharp words at home.
- We blame the pressure of work for losing our peace and making us worried, troubled, and harassed.

- We say it is our difficult neighbors that make us resentful and bitter. If it were not for them we could be sweet, lovely, and kind.

What we are saying is that the problem is not sin, it is circumstances. We do not need the cleansing of the blood of Christ. Obviously, if we sinned we would need that, but what we are saying is, we do not need this. What we need is our tensions unraveled by our psychiatrist. We are saying "I know I shouldn't have said that, or done this thing, but it's not really my fault. I can't help it. It's because of the circumstances and therefore it's not really sin. Sin is deliberate, sin is wilful, but I can't help myself and so I have not sinned."

Now put that alongside what John has said. "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." Again I say, there is nothing more common in Christian experience than this. After many years in the ministry, hearing many tales of problems, struggles, difficulties and hardship, I can say that this is far and away the most frequently-heard excuse for the weakness of Christian lives, this constant tendency to rename what is wrong or excuse it because of circumstance.

Now, look further at what John says. He says this is not only an evasion of reality, but it is also a direct accusation against God. "We make him a liar," he says, "and his word is not in us." In other words, we are not shifting the blame to some unknown, unstated individual, we are putting it squarely on God. The Christian always lives in direct relationship to God. There are only two people in life, as far as your basic relationship is concerned, you and God. So if we say it is not our fault, we are saying it is his fault:

"It's your fault, God, not mine. These circumstances that you've allowed me to get involved with make it impossible for me to obey you. Therefore, you're to blame. I want to do it. You know my heart. You know that I really want to be what I ought to, but, because of these circumstances, I can't, so it's really your fault!"

Now that is the oldest excuse in the world. It goes back to the Garden of Eden. When God came looking for man {see Gen 3:9 ff}, he said to him,

“Why did you do this thing?” And man said, “Well, it’s the woman you gave me. It’s your fault.” And when God said to the woman, “Why did you do it?” she said, “It is the serpent. It’s your fault because you let him talk to me.” So, the blame comes right back to God. We are, in effect, calling God a rascal and a double-crosser. But John uses even a worse name. He says, “we make him a liar.”

The Word of God makes clear that the Christian has a source of strength in Christ that is imparted to him from within. We are inwardly strengthened by him. As Paul puts it, “our inner man is renewed, day by day,” {cf, 2 Cor 4:15}. The outer man can perish, but the inner man is being renewed daily. Therefore, nothing outward should hinder us.

In Romans, Paul cries, “What can separate us from the love of Christ?” {Rom 8:35 KJV}. Then he goes through the list of possibilities. Can life, or death, or things present (your circumstances), or things to come (the pressure of the future), or height, or depth, or time, or eternity, or anything else in all creation, separate us from the strength of Christ, the love of Christ. But that is not what we say. We say to God, “Yes, there are a lot of things that cut me off from you and make it impossible for me to do what you ask me to do. Difficulties cut me off, and fatigue, and sickness, and pressure. Therefore, God, you’re a liar. You say that none of these things will do it; I say they do! Now, one of us is telling the truth and one of us is lying, and I know who it is; it’s you!”

Now think of the enormity of that charge! Here is what we are constantly saying to God: “Lord, it is your fault, you are not true.” Here we are, mere human pygmies, standing before the faithful and unchanging God, the God who has revealed himself as without a shadow of turning, absolutely faithful, and charging him with faithlessness; we glory in the unchangeableness of God when it comes to our comfort. We love to speak of the unchanging God, the Refuge from every kind of pressure. Yet, how strange it is that we can stand before him the next moment and defiantly assert that the reason for our weakness is not our failure, but his. We declare he is not faithful to his Word, he doesn’t keep his promises, he denies himself, he’s a liar.

I have often quoted First Corinthians 10:13 to Christians in difficult circumstances, “There has no

temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” I have had them look me right in the eye, and say, without batting an eyelid, “That’s not true. I have been tempted already above what I’ve been able to bear. I can’t stand this thing.” How many times do we say that, in one way or another? But what is that but calling God a liar? Do we realize it is impossible for God to be wrong and us to be right? If that were true, we would be God, not him. It is simply an impossibility.

We need to read again the book of Job and see how Job learned this great lesson. Because he was going through terrible pain and hardship, his heart protested and cried out against God. There came a time when God said to Job,

“Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.”{Job 40:2 RSV}

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

**“Gird up your loins like a man;
I will question you, and you will declare to me.**

**Will you even put me in the wrong?
Will you condemn me that you may be justified?**

**Have you an arm like God,
and can you thunder with a voice like his?” {Job 40:6-9 RSV}**

In that amazing fortieth chapter God puts to Job a series of test questions, asking Job if he can perform even the simplest functions which God performs every day. And Job’s answer is,

“Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee?

**I lay my hands on my mouth.
I have spoken once, and I will not answer;
twice, but I will proceed no further.”**

{Job 40:4-5 RSV}

**“therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”**

{Job 42:6 RSV}

But the blunt truth is, we do not like our circumstances. Is that not it? We do not like

where God puts us. We do not like the people or the pressures we have to live under, we do not like the circumstances that surround us, and we refuse to accept them. That is the real problem. Therefore, we are not interested in Christ's power to live in them. We do not want it. We have set our will against God's will. We have said, "You ask me to live my Christian life in these circumstances, but I don't want to do it." And we rationalize it all by saying we cannot help ourselves.

Now, let us be honest and admit that we fall because we do not choose to meet the circumstances with his strength, but we run away from them. We do not like them, we do not want to live in them, and therefore we blame it all on God. No wonder we lose fellowship. No wonder God seems to be our enemy, and things all go wrong. We find that peace has fled our hearts, we are troubled, harassed, worried, and upset. We find ourselves flying off the handle even more easily, and losing our patience and we are baffled by it all, not knowing what is causing all this.

Does this sound familiar? Well, John explains what the trouble is. In Verse 1, Chapter 2, he says,

My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin, but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, {1 Jn 2:1-2a RSV}

What does this mean?

Well, there is never any need to sin, but, if we find ourselves doing so, we have a perfect defense available to us; a defense which the Father will gladly receive, one that he already assures us will be welcomed. We have an Advocate with the Father who will rush to our defense immediately, but his defense is of no avail to us because we are still defending ourselves. There cannot be two advocates in this case. You either rely on his defense of you – the manifestation of his work on your behalf which has wiped away every stain, every sin which you ever will commit or ever have committed – or you must rely on your own defense. Here you are, standing before God, defiantly telling him that you are not to blame, that you have a defense. You are not guilty. You can explain all this by the pressure of circumstances, or it is really not what he says it is, it is something else, entirely.

Now, you see, as long as you remain defiant or evasive, you are still justifying and excusing yourself, and therefore the Judge can only condemn you, and permit the inevitable, built-in judgment that follows to upset you, overthrow you, harass you, baffle you, and leave you in weakness and folly. But if you will stop justifying yourself, he will justify you. The blood of Jesus Christ cannot cleanse excuses. It only cleanses sins. If you will say, "Yes, it wasn't the pressure, it wasn't the circumstances, it wasn't that these things are not as bad as you call them, it's that I chose to be impatient, I chose to be resentful. I decided to be worried and to let anxiety grip me." If we come to that place, then we discover that there is One who stands before the Father and reveals to him the righteousness of his life, and God sees us in him, and we are cleansed and accepted. Strength again flows into the inner man, peace comes back to our hearts, we are cleansed of our sin, washed and restored to the grace of God. Then we can go back into the very same circumstance, under the very same pressure, in the very same disagreeable relationship, and find our heart kept by the grace and strength of God.

Paul puts it so beautifully, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God that passes all understanding [You cannot explain it. Someone says to you, "How can you be so calm in the midst of these circumstances?" And you say, "I don't know, but it must be because I'm trusting Christ, resting on him.'], the peace of God that passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus," {cf, Phil 4:6-7 KJV}. Now is that not practical? That is not designed for church, that is designed for life, for home, for work, for your relationship with your neighbors, and your boss, and your mother-in-law, your children, everyone.

Now, why does John say, "he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world?" Why does he put that in? Obviously he is drawing a contrast between Christians and non-Christians. He is reminding us that when the Lord Jesus died upon the cross 1900 years ago, he not only paid the debt of our sins, he not only took our guilt, as Christians, but he took the guilt of the whole world. He paid the price for every man. There is no man who will be kept away

from God because of his sins, if he accepts the work of Christ on his behalf. Sin can never separate an individual from God, because of the cross of Christ. No matter how bad the sins, no matter how extreme it may be, or how long continued, sin can never separate anybody, anywhere, in any time, or any age, from the heart of God, if the work of the cross be received. That is the extent of the expiation mentioned here. But why does he remind us of that in this context? The answer is: It is to help us see ourselves.

- Why is it that all the world is not reconciled to God?
- Why is it that these others, whose sins have been already settled for on the cross, are living in estrangement and hostility to the God who loves them and who seeks after them?
- Why is it that men are still defying God, and blaspheming God, and turning and running from him, and experiencing the death, darkness, and degradation that comes from not knowing?

You know the answer: Because they will not believe him. They will not accept his forgiveness. He has forgiven them, but they have never forgiven him. As Paul puts it in Second Corinthians 5, “We are ambassadors for Christ, for God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them. Therefore, we beseech men, be ye reconciled to God,” {cf, 2 Cor 5:20}. We do not have to say to God, “be reconciled to men”; we are saying to men, “be ye reconciled to God,” {2 Cor 5:20b KJV}.

Now, that is the very same reason why we Christians are not enjoying the full flow of the Spirit of power, life, love, and wisdom, in our experience. It is all available to us, but we will not

receive it. That is what John means. Like the world, we are turning our back on it. We are saying to God, “I’m not interested in cleansing because, you see, I really don’t need it. After all, this is not a sin, it’s simply a weakness, just an inherited tendency, something I got from my family. I can’t help it.” That kind of thing is cutting the ground out from under the whole redemptive work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Though his power is all-available, it is not experienced because of that.

Now let us bow before him.

In a moment of quietness before God, let us confess this terrible tendency that each of us has unquestionably experienced, to rationalize sin, to excuse it, justify it, call it something else, doll it up, sprinkle perfume on it and make it look better, instead of calling it exactly what it is. Christ has found a way below, around, and above our circumstances. He can reach us despite the pressures; it is just that we do not want it.

Prayer:

Our Father, in this moment of quietness, search our hearts. We have not come here merely to play at being Christians, we want to really be Christians. We need this probing, searching finger of the Spirit to touch us, and to unveil to us the closeted areas, these closed doors that we have shut away from thee. Make us open, make us to be honest, make us to stop this eternal excusing of ourselves and to face up to the wonderful reality of thy challenge and promise, that nothing can keep us from being what we ought to be, or no one can keep us from it. May we begin to live in that way, a fragrance in Jesus Christ. We pray in His name, Amen.

Counterfeits and Reflectors

by Ray C. Stedman

We are considering John's great analysis, in his first letter, of the way to maintain unbroken fellowship with the Son of God. Such fellowship is described to us by Jesus himself as the flowing of rivers of living water out of the center of life. It is something that cannot be hindered by anything outward because it comes from within. Jesus said, "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. ... 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water,'" {John 7:37-38 RSV}. John adds, "this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive," {John 7:39a RSV}.

Now in this first letter of John we have examined the three conditions which, John indicates, interrupt the flow of these rivers. Or, to use the figure that John himself employs, that block the light that shines to us from the person of God. "God is light and in him is no darkness at all," {1 Jn 1:5b RSV}. We can block the light from shining into our life, and thus revealing reality in three ways:

- First, by ignoring the light, i.e., refusing to examine ourselves, never stopping to look at what the light reveals, going on with our life without ever stopping to ask ourselves questions about where we are and what we are doing and why we are what we are.
- Then we can close our eyes to the light by denying the possibility of sin. John indicates that it is possible to come to the place where we think that, for one reason or another, we are no longer able to sin.
- And finally, we can obscure the light by rationalizing the sin which is revealed in our life, by excusing it because of circumstances,

or calling it another name that does not sound as bad. We looked at that together last week.

Now John pauses in the flow of his discourse to deal with an inevitable human reaction to this kind of a searching examination of our spiritual life. In Chapter 2, beginning with Verse 3, we shall look at that reaction and what he says about it.

When I was a boy we had on the shelf of our library at home a big, thick book called, *The Journal of Home Medicine*. It had a lot of fascinating pictures in it – fascinating to me because I was hoping at that time to become a surgeon – and it gave a brief description of all the sicknesses that afflict the human race, their symptoms, and their cures, or, at least, certain suggestions as to the cures. I remember reading through that book many, many times, and feeling a kind of macabre fascination at descriptions of such horrendous things as cancer, diabetes, heart failure, perforated ulcers, and other equally horrible diseases. Inevitably, after each reading of that book, I became aware of certain symptoms which I had just read about that were apparent in my own body, and I spent some hours of intense anxiety over the suspicion that I was developing one of these terrible diseases.

Is that not what often happens when we start reading about sickness? We all have a bit of hypochondria in us, and perhaps it is true on the spiritual level as well. So when John is examining our spiritual lives, as a doctor would examine our physical lives, and points out the sicknesses of the soul, it is only natural that he would expect a reaction of spiritual hypochondria, in which some of us might feel we had some of these diseases, or even worse. He evidently feels there may be many who are saying to themselves, "Am I really a Christian at all? Can I even claim a saving

relationship with Christ?" If the Spirit has convicted us and we sense a lack, the question that is at the back of our mind may be, "Perhaps my trouble is not merely a break in fellowship; perhaps I am experiencing a complete breakdown of faith." Of course, as we saw in our series on spiritual warfare, the Tempter is very quick to suggest this very thing. He is alert to push us into such feelings, to arouse such fears within us, whenever we examine ourselves. So John stops to handle that very question.

And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says "I know him" but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. {1 Jn 2:3-6 RSV}

He is making here a very careful distinction between two things, relationship and fellowship. We have seen something of this in earlier messages, but he wants us to be very clear that there is a distinction between union with Christ and communion with Christ. The division here is marked by the phrase, twice repeated, "by this we may be sure." The first part is in Verses 3-4:

And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says "I know him" but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; {1 Jn 2:3-4 RSV}

John is talking here about an experience in the past for any believer in Christ. The original Greek makes that even clearer than our Revised {Standard} Version or King James Version. In the original what is said here is, "by this we may know that we have known him [perfect tense – something done in the past], because we are now keeping his commandments [present tense]." The present willingness to keep his commandments, John is saying, is a sign of a valid relationship. It is proof that an act of union with Christ has already occurred, you have been born again. Your actions have changed, and because they have changed and you do not behave as you once did but you now

have a desire to obey him, you can be sure you have indeed been born again.

Now please do not reverse this! Do not change it around. You cannot know God by attempting to keep his commandments. That is impossible. Let us be clear on that. You never come to know God by trying to keep his commandments, for the knowledge of God comes by faith in Jesus Christ. That must be first.

Martin Luther made the mistake of trying, as an Augustinian monk, to find God by keeping his commandments. He made a desperate and sincere effort to do anything that he felt God required of him, in order that he might discover and know God. This is always the hunger of the human heart, to know God. He would beat himself, spend days in protracted fasts, lay for long, weary, agonizing hours on the cold floor of his cell in the monastery, and try in every way he could to discover God by keeping his commandments, but it only drove him to despair. As you know, it was only when those words from Paul's letter to the Romans, "the just shall live by faith" {Rom 1:17b KJV} came alive to him, that he found God and then spent the rest of his life actually keeping God's commandments.

Now it must always come in that order. We receive Christ by faith, by believing his invitation and accepting him. When we do, he comes quietly and invisibly into our life and begins his delivering work. The sign of that delivering work is a change in our attitude about obeying him. John says there is a desire to obey God. Notice that Jesus himself declared this to us in the great message called the Upper Room Discourse when he said to his disciples (John 14:15), "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And (in Verse 21), "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me;" {John 14:15, 14:21a RSV}.

Many of you have heard the testimony of Bill Jones, the Los Angeles business man who, each year, picks up the check for the Presidential Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC. He makes a ministry of holding breakfasts and banquets across the nation and around the world as opportunities for Christian witness. Bill Jones became a Christian by faith in Jesus Christ. Years ago I recall hearing him say that in a short while after he became a Christian he had listened several times to Christians giving their testimonies and he was struck by the number of times he had heard Christians express a love for Christ – how much

they had fallen in love with the person of Christ. He said, at a private gathering at which I was present, “You know, I don’t think I can say that. I’ve been a Christian about a year, but I don’t think I’ve ever had any deep sense of love for Christ. This bothered me for a while. I didn’t seem to have what others had, but I ran across a verse that has comforted me a great deal.” And he quoted the verse I have just quoted to you, the words of our Lord in John 14:21, “He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.” Bill Jones said, “I don’t know that I have the feeling, but I do have a great desire to obey the Lord, and therefore I must love him.”

Now that is exactly what John is saying here. Are you willing to obey him? Whatever he makes clear is his will, are you already pre-committed in your own heart to do? Well, you may have a lot of problems as a Christian, you may have a sense of weakness or lack in your life, but one thing is clear:

- If you are keeping his commandments,
- If you desire to obey him,
- Then you know him.

You can be sure that you know him; that is what John declares. He puts this also in the negative in order that we may be doubly sure:

He who says “I know him” but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; {1 Jn 2:4 RSV}

Have you ever seen a counterfeit bill? I do not know that I have ever had one handed to me. I may have, and, if so, I passed it along without knowing. But I know one thing about counterfeit bills. Contrary to popular expression they never come in \$3.00 or \$7.00 denominations. You hear the phrase, “as phony as a \$3.00 bill,” but I have never seen a \$3.00 bill and I never hope to see one. Counterfeiters are smarter than that. At a superficial glance, a counterfeit bill appears to be perfectly normal and in a common denomination. But there is always something bogus about it, there is always something phony. There is a lack of exact correspondence. There is a blur somewhere, or something is omitted from it which marks it as a counterfeit bill. It is the same with a phony Christian, and there are phony Christians, many of them.

As John indicates, they say the right things. If you were to judge them by what they say, you would never know they were phonies. They go to the right places, they mingle with the right crowds, and they say the right things. They say “I love him,” but, as John indicates, there is something wrong with their lives: They disobey his commandments. They have no apparent desire to do what he says, to keep his word. Their lives are unchanged. Their actions are no different than they were before.

As a dairyman once said to me, “They preach cream, but live skim milk.”

Paul also warns about this in his letter to Titus. He speaks of some who, he says, “profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds; they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good deed,” {Tit 1:16a RSV}.

It was Charles Spurgeon, the prince of English preachers, who once said, “An unchanged life is the sign of an uncleansed heart.”

The Scripture is very clear about this:

- If the thief has not stopped his stealing,
- If the liar has not quit lying,
- If the alcoholic has not stopped drinking,

there is no good in his claiming that he is a Christian. If there has been no basic change in his life, there is nothing that indicates to him or to anyone else, that he has been delivered from bondage to Satan and the power of evil into the kingdom of God.

Now let me make something clear. You can stop all these things without being born again. There are many reasons why men quit something evil, if for no other reason than that it is bad for their health. You can stop these things without being born again, but you cannot be born again without stopping them. That is the claim John makes. He goes still further in Verse 5:

but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God [this is a preferable translation to ‘love for God’] is perfected. {1 Jn 2:5a RSV}

He declares that if we are willing to obey, then something else is also happening to us. If we keep

his word, if there is a willingness to do what he says regardless of whether we see the reasons for it, then something else is also happening to us: The love of God is gradually taking over our lives and changing us, it is being perfected within us. In Romans 5, the apostle says, “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us,” {cf, Rom 5:5b KJV}. If we have been born again, if we have received Christ and we are willing to obey him, then the love of God is doing something to us. It is being shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit and it is leading us on, step by step, toward the goal the Lord desires in our lives – the experience of continuous, unbroken fellowship with him.

Do you see how relationship leads on into fellowship? The act by which we began the Christian life is intended to precipitate a process that leads us into the experience of the fullness of Christ. It will, and it is, for God is at work in your life to do this very thing, for this is the goal of love. The love of God is being perfected, it is being completed, but it may take awhile. For some of us who are particularly resistant, it takes long years, and I speak from full experience here.

That brings us to the next section. What is the sign of fellowship? If an obedient will is the sign of relationship, what is the sign that we are beginning to move into the experience of fellowship? Well, that is in the latter part of Verse 5 and in Verse 6:

By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. {1 Jn 2:5b-6 RSV}

This phrase, “abides in him” means exactly the same thing as “fellowship with him.” They are one and the same experience. The Lord Jesus made that clear when he said, as is recorded in the 15th chapter of John’s Gospel, “As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me,” {John 15:4b RSV}. You can be in Christ, as a member of the vine, and only bear leaves. That is mere relationship. But if you want fruit in your life, there must be that further attitude of abiding in him, resting in him. That, he says, is what produces significant results in life. Without that, “you can do nothing,” {cf, John 5:5b}.

The sign of abiding, as John says here, is to walk in the same way in which Christ walked: “he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” That does not mean to do the same things that Jesus did; that means to act from the same principle upon which he acted, to reflect the same kind of relationship to the Father that he had. That is the sign of fellowship.

Now, you who are familiar with the record of our Lord’s life, how did he walk?

- How did he do the things that he did?
- How did he manage to speak such matchless words, convey such challenging ideas, do such remarkable things among men, and change lives so consistently?
- What was the secret of his power?

You can be sure that, while he was ministering, this was the question everyone was asking. “Wherein lies this man’s power?”

That is what brought Nicodemus to him by night, to try to ferret out the secret, if he could. Many others came wondering what the secret of his power was. The amazing thing was that he kept telling people what it was, as he keeps telling us. But we skip over it with easy disregard. He said, “the Son of Man does not do these things of himself.” That is, “I’m not doing this; it’s the Father who dwells in me; he’s doing it. I don’t speak these words of myself, but I speak only that which I hear the Father say. It’s the Father who speaks the words; it’s the Father who does the work. I am a man, available to him, but he is in me and his working in me is the secret of the things that I do. I am simply counting on him every minute to be at work and to do these things, and he does them,” {cf, John 14: 10-11}.

That is the great secret, and that is one of the hardest things for Christians to learn.

How did he walk? Well, he walked in total, unrelenting, unbroken fellowship and dependence upon the activity of the Father who indwelt him. But that seems so hard for us to learn. With us, it is the Son of God who lives within us, and he has come to reproduce the effect of his death and the power of his resurrection – to live again his life in

us. But we have such difficulty with this. Our attitude is,

“Please, Father, I’d rather do it myself!”

We are brought up with this idea that we have in ourselves an ability to act significantly, that God is looking to us to act on his behalf and if we fail him the whole program will fall apart, but if we do it God should be eternally grateful to us for our faithfulness.

Does this not represent our attitude?

But this is not Christianity. This is not what a Christian is called to do. If we ever learn the great secret that John is trying desperately to impart to us it will revolutionize our lives. We will never again be the same persons. When we begin to see it, and act on it, our lives are immediately changed, and five years from that day we will be more different than we were when it first hit us, and 50 years later we will be still different, so revolutionary, so transforming is this principle of action. A quiet, unrelenting dependence upon an indwelling God to be always at work in us, reproducing the value of his death and the power of his resurrection –

- That is what Christianity is,
- That is what fellowship is,
- That is what abiding in him means.

We are continually to expect him to do this and we are to consent to its being done.

But this is where the rub comes! We want him to do it despite us. We do not always want to consent to it, for his death means that we must absolutely renounce all the self life, all the self-centeredness around which our lives have for so long been built. His death cuts off the old man, with its egocentric ways. We do not like that. If we were arranging the Christian plan for living, we would devise a different process. In fact, we try to do just that most of the time. We want to make it some of us, and some of him. A little bit of glory, fame, power, and favoritism for us, and quite a bit for him. We are glad to let him have the lion’s share, but we hang on so desperately to something for us!

That is the problem, do you see? But his death absolutely eliminated the natural man. When he became man and died in our place, he cut off, he ended, not merely part of the old life, but all of it.

Therefore his death, reproduced in us, means that all of it has to go. But that is tough, that is hard for us to take. But, of course, what draws us on is the rest of the transaction. His life in us means the reproducing in us of the power of his resurrection, and that is wonderful because his resurrection power is the kind of power that works in the midst of death. When everything else has ceased to work, when nothing that man can do can be performed any longer, when all hope is gone, when all possible avenues of human endeavor have been blocked off, resurrection power begins to work. That is wonderful. That is a different kind of power than the world has ever seen, a kind that works when everyone else is discouraged. It keeps on blossoming, growing green and bright, full and productive. When everyone else’s life seems dead and dull, and for them life is monotonous and boring, this power keeps one alert and alive and interesting and fascinating. Resurrection life!

How we long for it. But, you see, the two go together. It is a package deal.

As Paul puts it, “that I might know him, and the fellowship of his sufferings and the power of his resurrection [both of them], being made conformable unto his death,” {cf, Phil 3:10}. That is fellowship.

That is what the love of God will lead us into, step by step, little by little, as we grow along with him.

And the sign of it?

We learn to be dependent upon the Father. We learn to walk as Jesus walked, in a complete and unbroken dependence upon another to work within us. That is the sign of fellowship.

Well, then, where does this leave us?

- Let us not be counterfeits, denying the faith by an unchanged life.
- Let us rather be reflectors, reflecting the character, the quality, and the principle by which the Lord himself lived his life.

Let me read you this description of that from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord [seeing the secret of

Jesus and of his life], **are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.** {2 Cor 3:18 RSV}

That is what John is talking about, that is what he is trying to lead us into, and what the Spirit of God is working at in our lives. That is the goal toward which God is leading. May we see that goal, may our eyes be opened, as Paul prays for us, “the eyes of our understanding enlightened” {cf, Eph 1:18 KJV}, that we may begin to see the direction in which God is driving, and walk with him in it.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for tearing away from our eyes something of the veil of unreality that has hidden these things from us in the past, so that we begin to see this is not something ‘religious,’ this is life itself, this is why we are here, this is what gives significance, fullness, and meaning to our daily experience. From this relationship with the Son of God comes joy and peace and righteousness, and all those qualities that make life worth living, despite the outside pressures and the adverse circumstances. Thank you, Lord, that you are making provision for us, and it is all the activity of the love of God being perfected in us. We pray that we may grasp this more and more, and cooperate with you in it. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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Visible Christianity

by Ray C. Stedman

One often hears today the saying that Christianity has been rejected by the world on the basis of a caricature which has been mistaken for the real thing. We 20th century Christians tend to say that as though it had never happened before. But we need to realize this is something that has been true ever since the 1st century and is not new at all. We have seen it in a new form, perhaps, in our own generation, but the phenomenon is a common one and has been true in every century. The work of the devil is always to distort and to twist truth, and to make it appear something which it is not. This, of course, is what we are experiencing today.

Now it is the ministry of the Apostle John to call us back to original things, to foundations, to fundamental issues, to repair that which is broken. This is clearly evident in this first letter, as John is correcting the twisted caricature of Christianity which existed in his day, and exists equally in our day. If you know the real, you will be able to detect the false and twisted form:

- The caricature, for instance, says that Christianity is primarily a religion concerned about the behavior of men. But as we see in Scripture, the real form of Christianity indicates that its primary concern is not with behavior at all, but with being, with character, from which all behavior must ultimately come.
- The caricature tells us that Christianity's attitude toward life is essentially negative – don't do this, don't do that, stop doing this, stop doing that. That is the view of Christian faith held by the average man on the street. But the real, genuine article says that in Christ we are discovering the secret of the fullest, freest, most satisfying life that could possibly be experienced by anyone. As Jesus himself

said, "I am come that they might have life, and might have it more abundantly," {cf, John 10:10b KJV}.

- The caricature says that the facts upon which Christian faith rests, i.e., the death and the resurrection of our Lord, are mere stories, legends that gathered around the figure of Christ in the early church, which Christians must accept by blind faith without any confirmation or support. But the real article says these are actions of God in history that can be tested by the normal means of testing evidence and that they form, therefore, a solid ground of faith based on history.
- The caricature says that the goal of the Christian faith is to produce a heaven filled with rather starchy, stiff, hymn-singing saints. But the real thing says the goal of Christian faith is to produce love-filled homes right now, filled with strong, manly men, and gracious, sweet-tempered women, and orderly, alert, admirable children, who live together facing the normal, usual problems of life with thoughtfulness and mutual dependence upon the activity of a living God in their midst.

Now that is real Christianity!

In this introductory section of the Apostle John's first letter we have been noting what he has to say about maintaining fellowship with the Son of God. That is the secret of the abundant life. In Chapter 2 he comes to the practical goal toward which all this is moving. You will find this in Verses 7-11. But may I point out that all of this section is a commentary on one phrase in Verse 5 of Chapter 2. John says there, "but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is being

perfected,” i.e., it is finding its completeness, it is being fulfilled in him who keeps God’s word.

Now, in Verses 7-11, he takes that phrase, “the love of God is being perfected,” and explains it, indicating that it is the supreme goal of the Christian life. I hope you catch the importance and urgency of his word. What the apostle is saying is that the goal of the Christian life is to cause us to love as God loves. The one single, most desperate need of humanity is for love. Yet, the twisted paradox of our lives in this 20th century is that we increasingly find it impossibly hard to give what another one desperately needs. Therefore, because others have the same trouble, we find ourselves unable to have what we cannot live without – love. There you have the whole pathetic tragedy of human life today. A hunger for love, on the one part, and an inability to satisfy it on the other. That is the dilemma of human life.

Just this last week I received a packet in my mail, a large manila envelope. I opened it, not knowing what was inside, and found it was a letter. The reason it came in such a large envelope was because it was 25 single-spaced typewritten pages. It was a letter from a lonely man who, writing in the loneliness of his hotel room in the loneliness of a big city, was simply putting down his thoughts, reactions, and attitudes, and mailing them to me with the hope that I would read through, and share some of his feelings. I could not help but feel that was typical of our day. The hunger expressed in loneliness is simply a cry for love out of the human heart.

Now, the glorious news of Christianity is that in this strange impossible dilemma in which we live, a tremendous breakthrough has been achieved. A way has been found, through the death and the resurrection of Jesus, and through the process of union and fellowship with him, by which we might fulfill these demands made upon us, and satisfy the needs of our own hearts.

See how John describes this in Verses 7 and 8 of Chapter 2:

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away

and the true light is already shining. {1 Jn 2:7-8 RSV}

Do those seem strange words, “an old commandment,” “a new commandment”? What does he mean? What is old and yet new? There is a clue here in his words, “an old commandment which you had from the beginning,” i.e., the beginning of your Christian life, as this phrase most frequently means in John’s letter. This is something that you learned when you first came into the Christian experience. It accompanied or was part of “the word which you heard,” i.e., God’s word to man. What is the first note of God’s word to man? Well, it is written all through the Scriptures. You find it at the beginning of the Bible and it runs like a river all the way through the inspired text, from beginning to end. Jesus called it the first and great commandment, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy strength, and all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,” {Matt 22:36-37, Mark 12:29-30 KJV}.

That was the first commandment to be broken. Adam violated it in the Garden of Eden when he chose to love his wife more than he loved his God, and, following her into temptation and sin, the race fell in him. The second part of it was violated by his son, Cain, whose contemptuous response to God’s inquiry about his brother has become the classic expression of loveless unconcern, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” {Gen 4:9b}. It is the violation of love toward God and toward men.

Now, John is indicating that this old commandment is, in some sense, new. What does he mean, “Yet I am writing you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you ...”? If you are familiar with his Gospel, you know this is an echo of our Lord’s own words recorded in the thirteenth chapter of John, in the Upper Room, “A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you,” {cf, John 13:34}. That last phrase, “as I have loved you” is the key. To love one another is an old commandment, as old as the human race. But “as I have loved you” is new. The manner by which we love, the process by which this can occur is new.

Did you ever think how difficult it was for our Lord to love the disciples? As you read the New Testament, how do you think of these men? We are so apt to see them through the aura of twenty

centuries of admiration that I'm afraid we glamorize these disciples and see them only as saints, almost plaster saints. But these were no plaster saints, these were very human men:

- There was Peter, with his tendency toward boasting, always a bit overbearing, very difficult to get along with at times, and so utterly unreliable, so given to boastful commitments that he could never fulfill and then falling flat on his face when the hour of testing came.
- And there were James and John, those two young men whom our Lord called the "sons of thunder," {Mark 3:17}. That is a very revealing description. I do not know exactly why he called them that but it evidently reflects something of their disposition, their temperament. We do know that they were somewhat spoiled young men, a bit selfish. It was they who came with their mother and asked Jesus for a place, one at his right hand and one at his left hand, when he came into his kingdom.
- Then there was stubborn, unmovable, doubting Thomas, and mousy, retiring, introspective Philip, and the practical, hardheaded Scotsman, Andrew, and all the others. They were sometimes most disappointing and frequently very disagreeable. There are even occasions when the Lord, almost in exasperation, says, "How much longer must I put up with you?" So if you think these men were easy to love, you are mistaken.
- There is that occasion in Luke 17 when the Lord said to them, "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in one day, and repents, then seven times you are to forgive him," {cf, Luke 17:3-4}. If your imagination fills in the details of that, you can see the apostles looking at one another and, thinking of the difficulty they have in even forgiving one another once, as one man they turn to the Lord and say, "Lord, increase our faith!" {Luke 17:5}.

- There was Judas, too, who betrayed him, whom the Lord knew was working against him from the very beginning.

Yet the wonderful truth is, he loved these men, loved every one of them. He was sometimes displeased with them, he was irritated by them, he was exasperated by them, but he loved them. And he said to them, "a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you," {cf, John 13:34 KJV}.

There, hidden in that last phrase, is the wonderful process that John is now explaining to us. He says this is the new commandment. "I am writing you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining." How did our Lord love these men the way he did? As Paul says in Romans, "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us," {cf, Rom 5:5 KJV}. That is also the way the Lord loved his disciples. The love of God was shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Spirit who was given unto him without measure. That is the only way anyone loves another the way God loves. Only God can love that way.

Therefore it is the same way for us. That is why John says, "which is true in him and in you." It comes out of a shared life. It is the fact that you and he share together the same life that makes it possible for you to love another who may be difficult, disagreeable, or hard to live with. It is because the love of God is shed abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit who is given unto you. That is the only way it can be done. This, therefore, is the new thing. The old commandment was there from the beginning. We are our brother's keeper. No man is an island. We have a responsibility to love each other. But we have never found the way until we find it in the sharing of the life of Jesus, the fellowship with the Son of God. In the light of that new power it is now possible to perform the old commandment. Therefore, John says, "the darkness is passing away."

Do you find that true in your life?

He does not say the darkness is past, because obviously there are still times of weakness. There are times when we become angry, and even hateful

toward one another, as Christians. But the darkness of hatred and indifference is rapidly passing away as the light of the nature of our Lord, the light of the character of God, is possessing us, gripping us, as we grow in grace and fellowship with him. This is the secret of love and there is no other.

Now comes the question, "How do you measure your progress in this?" How do you know how far along you have come, or whether you have even begun?

John answers that in Verses 9 and 10. You can test yourself by asking, "What is my attitude toward my fellow Christian, my brother in Christ, the man who, like me, professes faith in Jesus Christ?"

He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. {1 Jn 2:9-10 RSV}

What does he mean here by hate? – "He who hates his brother." The dictionary tells us that hate is "a feeling of extreme hostility or extreme dislike of another." That suffices as far as the definition is concerned. We know well the feeling, this dislike, this aversion to someone, a sense of extreme hostility toward another. Ah, yes, but it can be expressed in two different ways. It can be active, in that we indulge in malicious talk or injurious actions toward another. We can strike them, or beat them, or throw our garbage over their fence, or mistreat them in some way. We can attack them, we can slander them behind their back. All these are active expressions of hate, and perhaps most of us think of hate only in this sense. But hate can also be expressed passively and still be hate. It can be expressed by indifference, by coldness, by isolation, by exclusion, unconcern for another. Someone has well said that indifference is the cruelest form of hate. You only need to read the Gospel records to see how true that is. What hurt our Lord most was not the active enmity of those who were trying to accomplish his death, but the coldness and indifference of those who once followed him yet turned aside from him and idly stood by as he was put to death.

Now John says that he who hates his brother is not a Christian. He is "in the darkness until now,"

i.e., he has never come out of it. He is in the state of darkness in which the whole race is plunged and into which we were all born. He has never been removed from that. To say you are in the light and yet hate your brother is a basic denial of faith. We have seen this all along.

Notice also Verse 11:

But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. {1 Jn 2:11 RSV}

Such an attitude of hostility, indifference or unconcern toward another is a mark of an unregenerate life. But notice that the apostle is careful to make a distinction between walking in the darkness, and being in the darkness. To be "in the darkness" is to be unregenerated, as you see also from Chapter 3, Verse 14:

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death. {1 Jn 3:14 RSV}

Darkness and death are the same thing. He who hates has never been born again, has never passed into life.

To return to Verse 11, Chapter 2, he says "He who hates his brother is in the darkness," i.e., unregenerated, and he walks in the darkness, i.e., he experiences the effect of this in his daily life as he goes along. He describes what that is. It is not to know where you are going, i.e., not be aware of what hate is leading to.

Our papers today are filled with crimes of violence, unusual incidences of appalling, senseless violence. People are asking, where is all this coming from? Why is it that this kind of thing is breaking out all over the country? Where is this violence coming from? Remember the word of our Lord in Matthew 24? "When wickedness abounds, the love of many shall grow cold," {cf, Matt 24:12}. There is an inevitable consequence here. When the moral life of a nation degenerates to the place where immorality and wickedness abound, then there is a hardening, a stultifying of the life of that nation. The love that is intended to be like a fire in the heart of man grows cold and

unresponsive and, as a result, there come outbreaks of senseless violence and injury.

The Apostle John is tracing the same thing here. He says that he who hates his brother is in the darkness and has no idea where it will lead to. He does not know where he is going. He has no understanding that this can lead to murder or to mayhem, to heartache and heartbreak. He goes blindly on, stumbling on in his hateful attempt to do evil to his friend, or brother, or companion, whoever it may be. But the result is, he is only damaging himself and all he loves. He has no idea where he is going.

Furthermore, he is blinded, John says, “the darkness has blinded his eyes.” The word that is used here is a word that means “to make insensitive” and it implies that if we live in this way, we ultimately come to the place where we no longer can respond. Hatred grips us and hardens our heart and it is no longer able to be softened by any force that comes upon us. This is the warning that runs all through the Scriptures about the nature of human life. When we give way to feelings of hatred we inevitably harden our own heart.

Now, John says, only the worldling can do this. A Christian may temporarily succumb to this kind of thing (and we see this, otherwise there would not be these pleas in the New Testament for the Christian to put away malice, anger, hatred and all the other things). Yes, he can walk in darkness, temporarily, but he no longer is in the darkness. He is no longer a child of darkness. The light of God’s love has come into his heart. If he is not aware of a struggle between the expression of hate and a sense of concern, and conscious of guilt over his attitude of hate, then he ought to wonder whether he has really passed from death unto life. It is possible for a Christian to walk in darkness, as we find in Chapter 1, Verse 6: “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness...” But he is not in the darkness. This is something that the Spirit of God will inevitably deal with in the Christian and break, and it may sometimes be by very difficult measures.

I know some Christians who have had to come almost to the end of their life before they could face up to the power of hatred over them.

I remember an occasion when I was counseling with a woman about a physical problem which really had a spiritual basis in her experience. I

discovered she hated another person and had hated her for years. She told me the circumstances, and, undoubtedly, she had been treated unjustly, but the thing had eaten like a canker in her heart for years and years. Hate had turned her bitter and rancid and had poisoned all her thoughts. I said to her, “You must find it in your heart to forgive this person, as God has forgiven you.” She looked at me and said, “I can’t forgive her, I’ll never forgive her!” I said, “But God says you must.” She said, “But I can’t.” I said, “If you can’t, then you need to face the fact that you are not a Christian, because if you can’t forgive, then you’ve never been born again.” She looked at me, and said, “I guess you’re right. I know I am a Christian, and I see I have just been deceiving myself. I need to forgive.” And she did! There came a change in that woman’s life which was like turning from night unto day.

Now, a Christian can forgive. He can, of course, delude himself into going along with the world’s attitude that he cannot forgive, for it is true that the worldling cannot forgive. When the worldling hates he finds himself locked in an unbreakable grip that he cannot get away from. Hatred, bitterness, and resentment will follow him down through the years. But when the Son of God comes into his life, the power of the evil one is broken, and he is delivered from this, and can forgive. But we still must agree to it. God is not going to make us forgive apart from our own will, though the ability to do so is there.

Notice the contrast the apostle draws here in Verse 10. “He who loves his brother abides in the light.” That is, the fact that he loves is proof that he is abiding in the light, he is in fellowship with the Son of God. He is walking in openness and honesty before God, and the proof of it is that he loves all the disagreeable brethren around him. Though he may be irritated by them, or upset by them, he does not cut them off, he does not exclude himself from them, he does not go away and say, “Let them go their way and I’ll go mine.” Or, “I’ll forgive, but I’ll never forget.” Oh, no. He still shows that heart of concern which is born of the Holy Spirit, the love of God which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto us.

In the Sermon on the Mount our Lord said we are to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us and despitefully use us, and thus, he said,

“you will be the children of your Father in heaven” {cf, Matt 5:45}, i.e., you will demonstrate, you will manifest the fact that you are children of the Father, “who is kind to the ungracious and the selfish.”

Now that is what God’s kind of love is, not the love of the lovely but the love of the unlovely, a concern and manifest willingness to mix with, talk with, deal with and help those whom naturally you find it difficult to respond to. That is the love of God. “He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it – the light – there is no cause for stumbling.” If we walk in love toward one another there is no problem that cannot be worked out, there is no reason for division or schism among us, there is nothing that can separate us if we walk in the light as he is in the light.

Oh, the hunger of the world for the manifestation of love. And oh, the hunger of God that those yearnings of the world might be satisfied by Christian hearts which reflect the heart of God.

Prayer:

Our Father, this is a word for the day in which we live, in which abounding wickedness has turned many hearts cold. Their love has died, they have become indifferent to one another. What a cry there is today for a resurgence of love, a manifestation anew in the midst of this broken society of a love that loves the unlovely and is willing to help them, pray with them and be concerned over them to meet their need despite the irritating things they do. Lord, we pray that this may be manifest in us, not because we are trying to make it so, but because we have found the One who, if allowed to have his way, will make it so in us. We ask this in Christ’s name, Amen.

Growing in Grace

by Ray C. Stedman

It has been our privilege to sit under the ministry of the Apostle John, the Mender, the one to whom it was given by our Lord to restate the foundations of the church. This is the ministry of the Apostle John, both in his gospel and in his letters. In this first letter his primary concern has been to restore to Christians, in every age and place, that intimacy with and restful confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ himself, which John calls fellowship. Remember Jesus himself had spoken of this. He said that if anyone came to him he would put in him “a well of living water” {cf, John 14:4 KJV} which would be “in him.” It would be impervious to circumstances, could not be touched by anything outside. He also spoke of “rivers of living water” that would flow from within {John 7:38}.

In another place he describes this relationship as “abiding in him.” He said without this, “you can do nothing” {John 15:5 RSV}, i.e., nothing significant, nothing worthwhile, nothing lasting. This has been John’s theme in this letter.

Paul calls this “the filling of the Spirit” {Eph 5:18, Gal 5:25} because it comes to us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but he is referring to the same thing. He also calls it “spirituality,” that relationship to the Spirit, by which the life of Christ is so continually imparted to us that he clothes himself with our personality and lives his life again in us. Paul also uses the same term John uses, *fellowship*.

Now such fellowship with Christ ought to be the supreme concern of every Christian, because from it all power, all effectiveness and all satisfaction with Christian faith comes. If you are not satisfied with your Christian life and do not feel you are experiencing all that the Word of God promises, you are faced with a problem in the area of fellowship. John has already made clear to us in

this letter that it all begins with an act of relationship which results from a moment of choice when we deliberately, willfully, open our lives to the Lord Jesus. We receive him, we accept Christ, we invite him to enter into our life. That results in a new union. God acts, he does something to us, in that moment of choice. We are united with him. As the gospel tells us, we are “translated out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of his love,” {cf, Col 1:13}. We are removed from the power of Satan, his hold on us is broken, and we are brought into the kingdom of Christ and of God. John has given us certain signs by which we can know whether this is true or not. And all this is to lead on to an experience of fellowship, an attitude of faith, a dependence on the life of God within us, an openness to the light of God that shines upon us, moment by moment, at work, at school, with our friends, or wherever we are.

Now John introduces us to a third factor which follows relationship and fellowship. He adds a word which we will find frequently on the pages of Scripture – *maturity, full growth*, or, as you find it in the King James Version, *perfection*. The curse of the church has always been immature Christians, Christians who never grow up, Christians who cease their progress soon after beginning the Christian life.

It reminds one of that familiar story of the little boy who fell out of bed. When his mother asked what happened, he said; “I don’t know, I guess I went to sleep too close to the place I got in.”

This has happened to many Christians. They have never grown up. The Christian life is much more than a beginning in conversion, it is what happens after that which is of supreme importance. Christians who have never grown up are always a problem and cause many difficulties. If you are a brand-new Christian, just come to know Jesus

Christ, and still rejoicing in the thrill of new-found relationship, I am not speaking to you. You are not a problem, particularly, for there is always room and provision for babies in a family circle. But Christians who are yet babies after ten, twenty, thirty, even forty years of Christian life, these are the problem. They are immature, they refuse to grow up.

John now comes face to face with this problem and in the text before us he describes three stages of spiritual development, three levels of growth in the Christian life:

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:12-13a RSV}

There are three groups – children, fathers, young men. These have no relationship to physical age whatsoever, or to sex. It is possible for a man sixty years old in the flesh to be six months old in the Lord. It is possible for a woman to be a father in the sense used here, a mature, developed, full-grown Christian. A young man of thirty can be a babe in Christ, a father, or a young man according to the terms John uses here. These have no relationship to the time that you have been a Christian, the years since your conversion, or even to the position you may hold as a Christian.

A few weeks ago a friend and I were discussing a very prominent Christian leader, a man known throughout the West as a Bible teacher and leader. My friend was telling me of this man's reaction to a certain situation that had occurred, and his comment about him was this, "I never saw a more juvenile performance in my life!" What was the matter? Here is a man in a prominent Christian position who is still a babe, still immature, still a juvenile. He has not grown up yet.

Now let us look at these more closely. These successive stages of the Christian life (and, if you are a Christian, you belong in here somewhere) are introduced by the title, little children. John uses here a word in Greek which means "to be born." It is almost the exact equivalent of the Scottish word, *bairns*, born ones. He is referring to the fact that though they are young and immature, nevertheless, they are in the family. They have become part of

the family of God. You cannot get into a family without birth. That is true on the physical level, and it is true on the spiritual level. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again," {cf, John 3:7}. As John Wesley went about England, everywhere he would preach on that text, "You must be born again." Someone said to him once. "Mr. Wesley, why do you so continually repeat that text, 'you must be born again'?" Mr. Wesley said, "Because, 'you must be born again.'" That is the one way into the family of God, birth, the receiving of Jesus Christ and the birth of the Spirit.

Now John immediately describes the experience of all Christians which follows this new birth. "Little children, I am writing to you because your sins are forgiven for his sake." That is the basic Christian position. It is forever true of all Christians that their sins are forgiven, and it is always the first thing they become aware of when they become Christians. There is the lifting of the load of guilt, the solving of the problem of destiny, the forgiveness of sins. What a wonderful experience it is.

Remember, in *Pilgrims Progress*, John Bunyan describes it as Christian is struggling through the Slough of Despond. He is so discouraged, with a great and heavy burden on his back. Then he sees a cross a long way off and, finally, coming up to it, he feels the burden roll off his back and he has a great sense of release and freedom. That is the experience of the forgiveness of sin.

It is often a time of tremendous emotional release. Some of us look back at it and remember well how our emotions were stirred by a wonderful sense of relief. God had laid upon Christ the burden of our sins and we were set free from the awful load of guilt that harassed us and hounded us.

I remember a lady, years ago in Denver, who became a Christian after a very worldly life. When she sensed the glory of the truth that her sins were forgiven, she wanted to say something that would express it, but she did not know what to say. She had yet to learn words like "Hallelujah," so she cried "Whoopie!"

There are many who feel a deep, sweet sense of peace. No wonder they sing "O happy day, that fixed my choice on Thee, my Savior and my God."

It has been over thirty-five years for me since I first experienced the joy of the forgiveness of sins,

but I will never forget the great wonderful sense of the lifting of the load of guilt.

John does not mention here some of the negative aspects of spiritual infancy. He merely marks this one consistent, positive condition that is true of all who come to Christ – their sins are forgiven. He does not mention that, like physical babies, new Christians can often be rude and egotistical, emotionally unstable and overly dependent on other people. That is the way new babies are. They display many negative qualities, but the one thing that is universally true of them is that they are in the family, they have life.

I conducted an amateurish and unauthorized study of my youngest daughter when she was a baby and noted several things about baby personalities:

- I found, first, that she was very lazy. She did nothing but lie around the house all day, and contributed absolutely nothing to the household except to make a lot of trouble for everyone.
- And she was rude. She would burp right in your face and never apologize. She was utterly unconcerned about another's reaction or another's welfare.
- She was also highly uncooperative, oftentimes waking us up in the middle of the night for demands that could well have waited for morning.
- But there was one thing about her that kept me intensely interested in her: She knew her Daddy!

John says here, in the latter part of Verse 13, of these spiritual babes, "I write to you, children, because you know the Father."

But, you know, there was one thing I did not say about this little lassie. I did not say, "Look at her! Rude, uncooperative, lazy. If that's what a human being is, I don't want to be one." No, I realized that all she needed was growth. She needed to have her human life developed properly, trained. I knew that as she grew she would move into maturity. And that is what John is after here.

There must be a beginning in the Christian life, but it is only a beginning, it is not an ending. We

are intended to move, to go on, to "grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ," as Peter said {cf, 2 Pet 3:18}. This is what all the apostles aim for. Paul said, "Him (Christ) we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ," {Col 1:28 RSV}. Maturity, that is what he is after.

Now this is but a brief survey this morning. We shall spend more time with this passage because of its great importance to us.

John moves on to look at the other end of the growth process, the fully matured Christian, the fathers:

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. {1 Jn 2:14a RSV}

That is the chief characteristic of one who could be called a father, "You know him who is from the beginning."

Who is that? Well, that refers to the word with which this epistle opens:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was manifest, and we saw it, ... {1 Jn 1:1-2a RSV}

In other words, this is Jesus Christ. The mark of a father, then, is one who has come to know Jesus Christ. The word "know" carries the implication, "coming to know by experience." A father is one who has come to know, by long experience, the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are two inescapable factors about that kind of knowledge. There is personal acquaintanceship; it must be intimate, close, and personal, and, it must be over a long period of time. No one can become a father, in this sense, overnight. There must be years spent in fellowship together. The inevitable result of that kind of activity is resemblance, a mutual identity that grows out of such personal acquaintance over a long period of time. You often see this on the physical level, do you not? If two people live together a long time, know each other well, and are communicating – talking back and forth – they grow to be like one another.

I shall never forget once riding with a couple who were celebrating their thirtieth wedding anniversary. My wife and I were going out to dinner with them, and we drove to a restaurant they had in mind. When we got there we found it closed, and the man said to his wife, who was sitting in the seat behind him, “Oh, there’s that other restaurant, how about that?” And she said, “Yes! That would be exactly the place!” And without another word we drove right to it. There I realized how well two people can come to know each other when they live together.

Thus fathers are Christ-like. That is their chief characteristic. They possess in great measure the disposition of Jesus Christ. They have left behind the signs of immaturity. Remember Paul says, in that great love chapter of First Corinthians 13, “When I was a child I thought like a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things,” {cf, 1 Cor 13:11}. That is maturity, to put away childish things. Fathers are no longer juvenile in their attitudes, no longer unstable, petty, flippant, but are steady, thoughtful, competent, easy to live with. We will see more of this as we come back to John’s second survey of these classifications, in a further message.

The third stage he indicates is that of young men:

I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:13b RSV}

The indicative mark here is that a young man has overcome the evil one. This is the mark of those who are growing, who are strong, who are moving into maturity. They have overcome the evil one. What does that reveal?

- First it reveals that their eyes have been opened to the true nature of the struggle of life. As Paul put it in Ephesians 6, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood,” {Eph 6:12a KJV}. Our problem is not people. It is the immature Christian who says, “If so-and-so would just leave me alone – my boss, my mother-in-law, my daughter, my son, my husband, my wife, the Internal Revenue Department – if they would just leave me alone I would be fine. It’s people who are my problem.” But anyone who

has learned to overcome the evil one knows differently. He knows we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against wicked spirits in high places, against world rulers in this present darkness. The battle is in the mind, with ideas, with attitudes, with subtle and alluring temptations that come in hidden ways. Here is the true battle, and these young men have had their eyes opened to the struggle and have come to grips with these powerful invisible forces that wreak such havoc today.

- Furthermore, they have learned to live deliberately and consistently in fellowship with the Son of God, for that is the only way to overcome the evil one. You cannot do it by your own might. You cannot do it by your own intellectual power, you will be beaten every time if you try that as, consistently, men and women have been beaten for centuries by the wiles and the guile of the devil. How do you overcome? Well, as Paul puts it again in Ephesians, “be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might,” {Eph 6:10 KJV}. These young men have learned this. They have learned how to walk in the Spirit. They have learned to avoid the perils which John mentions earlier in this letter, the peril of ignoring light, of denying the possibility of sin, and of rationalizing their wrong-doing, giving it more appealing names. They have learned to walk in fellowship, walking in the Spirit.
- Yet they are not mature. They are spiritual, but they are not mature. They lack yet the full range of Christian experience.

There is great confusion in Christian circles at this point. There is a difference between spirituality and maturity. Maturity is the final goal. It is what the Spirit of God is aiming at, for you to be a grownup, mature, experienced Christian. Spirituality is the process by which you get there. Maturity is produced by time spent in fellowship, in spiritual relationship, to the Son of God. That is why you can live for years as a Christian and never mature, for the years are not spent in fellowship but in walking outside this relationship of fellowship with the Son of God.

See how this works on the physical level. You fathers here, suppose your little boy came to you, and said, "Daddy, I want to grow up to be big like you are. I want to be a man. I want to be as tall as you are, and as big as you are, and as strong as you are. How do you do it?" What would you say? Would you say to your son, "Well, go and try hard to grow. Think about growth. Strain at it all the time. Chin yourself every morning when you get up, constantly be stretching and thinking about growth. Work at it. That's the way to grow." You would not say that. You would say, "Son, if you eat well, exercise, sleep, and keep healthy, you can't help but grow. Growth is automatic. You'll get there. Don't worry about growing, but give yourself to the conditions that make for growth and you'll get there."

Now apply that to the Christian life. It is equally true. The key to growth is fellowship with the Son of God, spiritual health. You want to be a mature Christian, able to take whatever comes, able to keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you? Then, give yourself to the conditions that make for health:

- Eat Christ, eat his Word, grow in the knowledge of him, think, talk, communicate with him.
- And sleep, i.e., rest in Christ. Learn how to rely on his strength, not yours, and live in constant expectation that he is working in you to do his good pleasure.
- And exercise! Serve him, obey him, move out, take on things to do, open your eyes and step out to meet the needs that call out all around you, the cries of suffering and anguished hearts, the lonely and discouraged.

- When you do, you will discover that you have overcome the evil one, he cannot get at you. And bit by bit you become like Christ, the most attractive, the most fascinating, the most compelling personality that ever lived.

Now we shall return to this, and see more of these stages of growth in detail later. This is but a brief survey. But this truth is so practical, so helpful, it introduces us in a very practical manner to the table of the Lord.

This is what our Lord had in mind when he instituted this Supper. He said, taking the bread, "This is my body which is broken for you," {cf, Luke 22:19 KJV}. What do you do with bread? Well, you eat it. And thus we are to eat Christ. Oh, not in this symbolic form only but we are to take him in and feast upon his strength, and, in this spiritual sense, live our life on the strength which he provides. That is what the Lord's Supper means.

Prayer:

Our Father, as we come to this table of the Lord we ask to understand more fully what is involved in this symbolism. This is no magic, no hocus-pocus, by which our spiritual lives will somehow be strengthened as we eat a piece of bread and drink a bit of grape juice. Rather, this is a symbol of what must be taking place in reality in our spirit and soul, if we are to really be what we claim to be. Teach us this, Lord. Tear away the veil that hides the truth from us. Make us see behind the symbol to the reality. May we grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.

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The Maturing Process

by Ray C. Stedman

To me, the true glory of the Christian message is not the fact that it is a way to get to heaven, (though there was a time in my early Christian life when that was all important to me, and it certainly is the way to get to heaven), but the richness of the Christian proclamation to me is that, in Christ, I discover a way to become a man. That is the really tremendous thing. God is not interested in making saints, period. He is interested in making saints, but only as one step in the process of producing men. After all, that is what God is after – men and women. The goal is not sainthood, but manhood and womanhood, as God intended them to be.

All the writers of Scripture aim toward that goal. You can see this in the first letter of the Apostle John. He makes clear right from the beginning that it is impossible to become a man, as God intended men to be, without first becoming a Christian. In other words, God is absolutely necessary to the process of fulfilling our humanity. God is not, therefore, an option to life, as we are being told on many sides today. He is the most basic necessity of life. It is impossible to live and fulfill ourselves without coming to know God through Jesus Christ. Our Lord himself put it flatly, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God,” {cf, Matt 4:4}. That is essential to the full development of manhood and womanhood.

Now in this passage in First John, John has told us there are three stages in the process of becoming what God intends us to be. These he describes in Verse 12 and part of Verse 13:

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:12-13a RSV}

There are three classes, three stages of growth: little children, fathers, and young men. Other Scriptures confirm this three-fold division, this three-fold step in fulfilling manhood. In our Lord’s parable of the sower he reminds us that when the good seed (which is a picture of the Word of God, the gospel itself) falls onto good ground, it brings forth in three degrees – some thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, and some a hundred-fold. There are three stages of spiritual growth: little children, young men, and fathers. These are evident also in the three types of food the Scriptures mention as available to Christians. Both Peter and Paul speak of the “milk” of the word for babes in Christ, because milk is the proper food for infants. John describes our Lord himself as the “bread” of life, that which makes for strength in the Christian experience. Again, Paul speaks of the “strong meat” of the word. In those three you have a reference to these three stages of life.

They are evident also in Romans 12, where Paul speaks of the Christian’s experience of understanding, and knowing the will of God. He says we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice unto God, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship, and by this we come to know, he says, “what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God,” {Rom 12:2b KJV}. To an infant, spiritually, the will of God is good, but he does not see beyond that. It is not always pleasant, but as he grows he learns that it is acceptable, that it is the right way to work it out, though he still has not learned to enjoy it. Then at last he comes to the place where he understands that what God chooses for him is perfect. It is exactly what he should have. Though he is still, perhaps, not enjoying it in the flesh, yet in the Lord he rejoices in what God is doing.

You can see these stages again in the three degrees of rewards that are promised to believers in Christ. In First Peter, he says that at the appearing of Christ we shall receive “praise and honor and glory,” {cf, 1 Pet 1:7}. The Apostle Paul says that every Christian receives praise from God. And the Lord Jesus says, “If any man serve me, him will my Father honor,” {John 12:26b KJV}. While both Peter and Paul speak of the glory that awaits those who have learned to walk in the Spirit, Peter describes the Chief Shepherd who gives us “a crown of glory, which fadeth not away,” {cf, 1 Pet 5:4 KJV}.

Again these three are strongly suggested in those three abiding things that Paul mentions in First Corinthians 13, faith, hope, and love. Is it not true that to the new Christian, faith is the pre-eminent thing he is concerned with? It is the elementary factor in Christian living, believing God and doing what he says. But as the Christian goes on, hope lays hold of his heart. He sees the possibility of fulfilling all that he dreamed of being and doing. He realizes that, in Christ and by means of the life of faith, there is a way of entering into all the promises of God, and that hope makes him strong, as a young man should be. But as he goes on he discovers that the one thing, above all that marks him as Christ’s and fills his own heart with satisfaction making him easy to live with, is the pouring forth of love. “So abides faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love,” {cf, 1 Cor 13:13 RSV}.

Thus all the Scriptures testify to these three stages of growth.

Now, coming back to John, we find him addressing each of these classes again. Going back over them he adds another word, this time not to describe what they are like, but to explain what made them this way. He answers the question: “Why?” What makes them the way he has described them earlier?

I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:13b-14 RSV}

There are the same three classifications again.

Again he first addresses the little children. In the previous section they were described as those “whose sins are forgiven.” That is the most elementary thing you can say about a Christian, his sins are forgiven. Well, why forgiven? Now he makes it clear. “Because you know the Father.” That is why sins are forgiven. They have joined the family of God and come to know the Father. They have come to God through the only way any one can come to know the Father. Remember that the Lord Jesus himself said so. “No one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him,” {cf, Matt 11:27, Luke 10:22}. Or, as he puts it in that oft-quoted passage in John 14, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me,” {John 14:6 RSV}.

John does use a different word here for children than he uses in the previous verse. In the first, he used a word which means “born ones”, *bairns*, the newborn children in the family. Here he uses a word which means, “children under instruction,” students, if you like. “Now little children, who are under instruction, I write to you because you know the Father.” The first lesson the Holy Spirit teaches a new Christian is that he has come to a Father. He has not come to a stern and austere Judge, as many think of God before we know him in Christ. And certainly he has not come to a senile, sentimental Grandpa who gives him anything he wants. But he learns that he has come under the care and affection of a strong, tender, true Father, with a father’s heart. Is it not beautiful the way Paul puts that in the letter to the Galatians? “Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” {Gal 4:6 RSV}. That is a baby’s word for his father – “Abba.” Even baby lips can say that. It is the equivalent of “Da Da,” and, if you would like to speak Hebrew, I suggest you start there for that is the Hebrew expression for “father.”

Certainly that is what we learn, is it not? We are not living in a cold, mechanical universe, clanking on its relentless way, and we but helpless victims of inscrutable forces which grind us up in the machinery of life. As the Lord makes clear, we are in the hands of a Father,

- A Father who knows us and loves us, who has an intense concern for our development,

The Maturing Process

- A Father who has numbered the very hairs of our head, and without whom not even a sparrow falls to the ground;
- A Father who is aware of our deepest needs and is abundantly able to provide them.

That is the one we have come to. “I write to you, little children, because you know the Father.” What a glorious thing it is to see the birth of a new life in Jesus Christ, and to watch the joy of a babe with his Father, and the Father with the babe.

But even that joy soon turns to sorrow if the baby remains forever an infant. A major problem, oftentimes, in Christian circles is that we are constantly trying to cling to the joys of spiritual infancy. We remember the glory of that moment when we came to know the Father, the warmth of it, and the joy entering the family circle, and we are constantly trying to get back to that. That is why many of our hymns seem to look backward into the past with evident nostalgia and an obvious desire to return. But you cannot go backward, and it is wrong that you should try. To do so is to become a case of arrested development, to remain an infant in many, many ways.

But infancy is hard to live with, on a permanent basis. Any of you who have a baby in your house know that you are looking forward to the day when he begins to sleep all night through, and gets off this awful cycle of the bottle, which seems to demand attention every 20 minutes. You realize there are many problems about infants. Paul lists some of these concerning spiritual infancy in Hebrews 5. He says the mark of an immature Christian, a babe in Christ, is three-fold:

- First, he cannot tell the difference between good and evil. Therefore, he is always getting into trouble, without realizing it. He goes charging ahead, thinking he has the answers to everything, and he ends up in trouble because he has not yet learned the difference between good and evil-good, when it looks bad, and evil, when it looks good.
- Nor does he know how to apply the word to his behavior. He is “unskilled in the word of righteousness,” that word which results in right conduct. Again, he is forever getting himself

into difficulties because he does not know how to apply the word to his own behavior.

- And, third, he cannot teach or help others, but needs to be taught again himself. Paul is scolding these Hebrew Christians because they have been Christians long enough that they ought to be helping others but are, instead, in desperate need of being taught themselves.

These are the marks of infancy.

Now he goes on to the fathers. He says, “I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.” That is exactly what he said before, is it not? It is word-for-word the same, he adds nothing here. He described them as those “who know him who is from the beginning.” That is the mark of a father. Now he explains how they became that. They know him who is from the beginning! In other words, both the way to maturity and the mark of maturity are the same thing. After all, what else can one say? When someone, after years of walking in the Spirit and testing the faithfulness of God, has come to know the eternal God, the One who is from the beginning, to really know him, what else can you say of him?

I remember well in grade school that I learned the hard way that you cannot compare the word, *perfect*. I was sent to the board one day by the teacher, who gave us certain illustrations to write on the blackboard and make a comparison, as good, better, best, etc. She gave me the word, *perfect*. She did it deliberately, trying to trap me, and I fell into the trap. I wrote “Perfect, more perfect, most perfect.” She said “You’re wrong.” I said, “Well, it can’t be perfect, perfecter, perfectest.” She said, “No, it is just ‘Perfect’. If a thing is perfect, it can never be more perfect, or most perfect, it is just perfect.”

That is the word here about these fathers. It is also translated, mature. It is the word, full-grown, perfected – not, of course, in the sense of faultless. No Christian ever comes to that place in this life, the Word of God makes that clear. But it is used in the sense of having mastered the fundamental principles of spiritual life. Having reached the end of the growing process, these come to full growth, and the rest of their life is devoted to the joy of experiencing, in a thousand ways, seeing God at work.

We use the word this way in physical life. When a child reaches the age of 21 we say he is full grown, mature. But do we mean he is ready to stop living? No, no, he is ready to start living, really. This is not the end of progress, in other ways, at all. More than anything else, it is the beginning of the enriching of his life. He has now got all the physical equipment he needs, that is the point. There is nothing he needs yet to have in the way of equipping himself. Ah, but he needs to learn a great deal in the way of using this equipment, and this is what John means here.

The fathers are those who are mature because they have learned how God operates, they have mastered the techniques of faith.

Now we come to the last class, the young men:

I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:14b RSV}

I believe John placed this last for a very important reason. He has already described these young men as those who have overcome the evil one. He repeats that again, but he adds this explanation, “you are strong, and the word of God abides in you.” He put that last because here is revealed the secret of growth. What makes a child, spiritually, become a young man, spiritually? Why, the Word of God abiding in him! What makes a young man become a father? The Word of God abiding in him! That is the secret of growth. That is what will move him from one stage to another until at last he becomes a father, able to reproduce himself in others. It is by the Word of God, abiding.

Here, then, is the divinely designed instrument of growth, the Word of God. It is absolutely impossible to grow up as a Christian, or as a real man or woman, unless the Word of God abides in you. This is why the devil fights this whole matter of Bible study, the building of your life around the centrality of the Scriptures and the authority of the Scriptures, and why there is loosed a constant barrage of attack at this level. It is the supremely important thing to move us into maturity. Though the devil cannot stop us from being Christians, he can certainly keep us from becoming strong Christians, and this is exactly the way he does it.

He introduces false methods of maturing. He tries to divert our attention, and get us off onto spiritual sidetracks. He brings in certain apparent shortcuts which offer to bring us to maturity in an instant. Instant spirituality, instant maturity! That is up-to-date, is it not? That is what we are looking for in these days. He suggests that if you can just get the experience of speaking in tongues, you will be mature. If you can have visions of Christ, then you will be mature. Even if you give yourself to exploring the realms of human knowledge, this will bring you to maturity. But all these things are simply ways, cleverly designed, to arrest Christian growth.

Across the experience of years, I have watched these things prevent maturity by diverting attention from the divinely designed instrument which will bring it about, the knowledge of the Word of God.

Now do not misunderstand that. I am not talking merely about Bible study. There is a very mechanical, wooden approach to Bible study which gets you acquainted with the teachings of the Bible, but that is not enough. This passage, remember, says the Word of God “abides.” That means a knowledge of the Bible plus obedience to the Spirit. When the Scriptures speak of knowing the Word of God, it is never merely talking about the instrument of the Bible, it is always the Bible plus the Spirit. It is the Word understood in the light of the illuminating, searching power of the Holy Spirit. It takes these two, together, to produce maturity. It is not a matter merely of taking the teaching of the Word into the mind, but it is something deeper. The Word lays hold of us. We first lay hold of it, and then it lays hold of us, and thus the Word abides, it penetrates to the conscience, it lays hold of the will, it exposes “the thoughts and intents of the heart” {Heb 4:12b}, and that is what produces maturity.

Now this means, of course, that our studying must be deliberate. The knowledge of the Word must be more than a hobby with us, or a diversion, an option in life, a kind of low-calorie dessert which we can take, or leave, as we please. No, no. This demands time and strength. The exhortations of Scripture are to be diligent in this. “Grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord,” {cf, 2 Pet 3:18}. Be diligent about searching the Scriptures and studying the Word.

Notice how the apostles labored to make these things clear, and to drive this point home. When

the Apostle Paul met with his dear friends from Ephesus on his last visit with that church, going up to Jerusalem, he was facing the possibility of bondage and imprisonment there for Christ's sake. He called them together and said, as his closing words,

“Now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up [That is what we need, is it not? What is the instrument? Why, the Word of God.] and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified,” {Acts 20:32 RSV}.

That is, to open the door of experience into the realm of walking in fellowship with Jesus Christ. What does it? Why, the Word of God. As Paul wrote to Timothy, his son in the faith,

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work, {2 Tim 3:16 RSV}.

Surely this means we must deliberately give ourselves to the study and knowledge of the Word of God. You cannot treat this as something that is nice to know if you like it, or something you can adequately get from the pulpit on Sundays. This requires opening the book and digging into it and understanding these vital things. You must be able to explain to another what is meant by justification, or sanctification, and all these other great words of Scripture. What if somebody comes up to you and says, “Well, I don't believe in the resurrection of the body,” what are you going to say? Have you worked through Paul's great argument in First Corinthians 15, so you can answer that statement like he does, saying, “Look, if you don't believe that, then this and this and this is true. You must be ready to throw those things out if you throw out the resurrection of the body.” You see, that is what makes us strong, that is the maturing process which makes us fathers.

Further, our knowledge of the Word must be permitted to govern our conduct and attitudes in the normal encounters of life. Here we touch upon the whole problem of social unrest and the moral decline of our day. What is wrong with our day?

Why is this terrible tempest of violence and evil sweeping our country? Why all this tremendous spread of neuroses and psychoses and mental disturbances and breakdowns? Well, if you view it in the light of the Scriptures, it arises because Christians, who talk on Sunday about loving their neighbors, go home to build walls of exclusion and remoteness all week, from Monday through Saturday. That is why. The Word has not moved from the head into the heart. It has not laid hold of us, it is not abiding within us.

These things have come about because Christians react to the unpleasant situations that they get into exactly the same way that the world does. They do not react as the Lord says to do, but as the world does, with grumbling, quarrelsomeness, resentments, with vengeance and attempts to get even, and even with open revolt and rebellion. The result is, the salt that is in society has lost its savor and, as the Lord said, it is “good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men,” {Matt 5:13b KJV}. By and large, that is what is happening in the world today. The message of the church is regarded as useless, worthless, not good for anything, irrelevant, meaningless, trodden under the feet of men. Why? Because the word is not abiding in our hearts and there is no salt in society.

I have learned that such a condition is revealed by denouncing what is going on today. When I see Christians pointing the finger at the moral decline and wringing their hands and saying “Oh, what terrible things are happening, how fast we are going down the hill to apostasy, etc.,” I know I am listening to someone who is not allowing the Word to judge his own heart. A denunciatory attitude is a revelation of a lack of sympathy, therefore a lack of love, since sympathy is a form of love. There is no understanding of the pressures that grip men and hold them in bondage today, the awful power of these demonic forces that are let loose in our world and society. The only thing that can break through is the love of God in Jesus Christ, and the revelation of the Word of God. When someone spends their time denouncing these things, I know that they have not yet let the Word get down into their own heart and judge them.

In the November issue of *Eternity Magazine*, Dr. David Hubbard, President of Fuller Seminary with whom I have just been enjoying a few days of fellowship, has an article on the authority of

Scripture that puts things so beautifully I can not refrain from quoting a few of his major points to you. He says there are five things that we Christians must be doing in this day to reassert the authority of the Scriptures, and to reestablish the power of God in human society.

- 1) First, we ought to examine ourselves, to see whether we are really living, thinking, preaching, and praying in ways that mirror God's word. As Peter says, "the time has come for judgment first to begin at the house of God."
- 2) Second, we must make clear that to us Scripture does, in fact, stand in judgment over all other tests of ethical and doctrinal truths. Scripture is the last court: when it speaks everything else must be judged in the light of what it says.
- 3) Third, Scripture must be more than a good place to find solutions to problems of life, along with Ann Landers, Tennessee Williams, and Peanuts. Scripture does more. Scripture tells us the source of these problems, and drives home to our hearts and minds problems not yet felt or thought of.
- 4) And, fourth, the authority of the Bible must be regarded as the authority of Jesus Christ. Our loyalty to the canon of Scripture is but one aspect of our sturdy commitment to the truth of Christ's witness about God, himself, and us. It all rests on him and what he says.

- 5) Fifth, the belief in the authority of the word must be harnessed to a trust in the power of the word. Where the living church is demonstrating the power of the word, there will be little question about its authority.

Those are great words.

And this is the way we grow.

Do you want to be an immature Christian all your life, a problem to others, constantly needing to be helped along with this crutch or that crutch?

Or are you earnestly desirous, (and I know God has placed that desire in your heart), to be a strong, mature, fully God-dependent man or woman, able to walk through life and face its problems without being overthrown or tossed about by every wind of doctrine that blows, fulfilling your manhood and your womanhood in Jesus Christ?

That is what he calls us to. That is what fellowship in Christ means.

The instrument that is given to us by God is the Word of God in the hands of the Spirit of God. Without that we have no hope of fulfilling the divine program.

Now, God calls us to diligence in this. Let us begin!

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this searching word from the Spirit today to expose our laziness and our unwillingness to listen to what we read and hear and see, and our slowness to obey, and to put aside the things the Scripture says are wrong, and to lay hold of the great provision for our full development in Jesus Christ. We ask in his name, Amen.

The Enemy Around

by Ray C. Stedman

It is significant that the first subject John chooses to instruct upon is that which is supreme in Christian experience because it is the fountain from which both truth and love must flow – fellowship with the Son of God, the shared life. This is also the way to maturity, as we have seen. We learned that we do not achieve maturity by some sudden certain experience. It does not come in one moment of time. We achieve it in fits and starts, as we do physical growth, in varying degrees and through varying experiences. These experiences and moments of growth can be divided, as the apostle divides them, into three general stages of Christian life, marked by these terms, “little children,” “young men,” and “fathers.”

Now, in a final word on the subject of maintaining fellowship, the apostle deals with the supreme peril to fellowship, and, therefore, the greatest peril to Christian maturity. Here is a great enemy of the Christian, the siren voice that seeks to lure us aside, trap us, delude us and ultimately to defeat us, in our Christian experience.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. {1 Jn 2:15-17 RSV}

Surely this is a much abused passage. Each of us has heard it used to denounce everything from buttons to beer, from opera to operations, from the waltz to the watusi. Anything that is currently the subject of Christian disfavor has been crammed into this passage, labeled “worldliness,” and denounced. I am not interested in adding to that

list. I am not interested in denouncing, but understanding. Surely there is something very clearly evident to us as we approach a passage like this and that is that the apostle desires to warn us that the world is dangerous. There is clearly something very dangerous about the world, otherwise he would not speak as strongly and as sharply as this: “Do not love the world or the things that are in the world.”

Now what is it that is dangerous about the world? That is what we must discover. The first step in doing so will be to note that the apostle divides this enemy into two major divisions. “Love not the world,” he says, “nor the things that are in the world.” Now why does he make this distinction, and what difference does it make? Does it need to be said that the world which the apostle is talking about is not the physical world, the world of nature? There is nothing wrong with loving the physical world. God has given us the world of trees and mountains, of skies and seas. We sometimes sing,

This is my Father’s world,
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas –
His hand the wonders wrought.

There is nothing wrong with that world. Nor is this dangerous world the world of humanity, of people with their many different practices, customs and interests. We know it is not wrong to love that world because God himself loves it. That most famous of all Scripture texts says so, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life,” {John 3:16 KJV}. That is the world of humanity, the world of people.

But nevertheless there is a world that we must not love and John evidently expects his readers to

know what that world is. It is something he has evidently often talked over with them and described to them, and now he does not need to define it for he knows that they know what he means. This would suggest that the world which John has in view here is clearly defined for us in other parts of Scripture. We shall find it most clearly in John's previous writing, the Gospel of John. In the Upper Room Discourse John records our Lord's words, and he speaks in warning about the world:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” {John 15:18 RSV}

Here is a world that hated Jesus Christ. What world is that? Obviously, the representatives of that world were the enemies of Jesus. Who were they? It is most striking to recall that the enemies of Jesus were basically religious men. This world which the Christian is not to love is, therefore basically, primarily a religious world. It is not exclusively so for there was a secular world which hated Jesus as well. The representatives of the secular world hated the Lord Jesus, not with the hate of outright enmity, but, which is worse, with the hate of callous indifference. Our Lord said that the world would hate us because it hated him, and John says this is the world we must not love. We must not love that which hates Christ.

The world hated him because he constantly challenged its basic philosophy. He was in continual protest against that to which the world was irrevocably committed. Our Lord put the whole matter plainly one day when he said, “You are those who seek, not the honor which comes from God, but that which comes from man,” {cf, John 5:44}. There is the philosophy of the world, the world that John says we must not love. It does not look beyond this life, it is concerned only with the honor which comes from men and unconcerned about the honor which comes from God. It is a philosophy which is bounded at one end by a cradle and at the other end by a casket. It is centered only in this life and this world. Jesus challenged that concept wherever he went and whenever he spoke. Because he thrust so decisively against this, he was hated and men banded together to put him to death. It was this philosophy which was ultimately

responsible for nailing the Son of God to a bloody cross.

Think about that for a moment – this philosophy that says the only important thing is this life – think how widespread that is today. Are we not constantly exposed to this idea? Does it not subtly penetrate everything we touch today? We see it underlying all of life. It makes its appeal in every magazine. It is blazoned on every billboard. It is shouted abroad by radio and television, every time we turn a dial. It can be summed up in this precise way. “There is nothing better, there is nothing higher, there is nothing more precious than what this earth can give you: its money, its pleasures, its fame. You had best eat, drink, and be merry, for there is no nobler life than that.”

Now, John says do not love that idea, do not love that philosophy, do not think it important. Be careful that you do not give yourself to that way of thinking. If you do, you will lose out on the fullness of Christian experience. You will be eaten by the devil. You will be trapped, deluded. You will become the victim of the Big Lie, and your very humanity will be wizened and withered by that philosophy.

“Well,” you say, “how do you battle this? What can you do about this? If it pervades everything around us, where does the battle begin?” The answer is: with “the things that are in the world.” There is where we must fight this battle. It is not enough to say, love not the world. It must be brought down to specifics. It must be reduced to that with which we actually come in contact. So John adds, “the things that are in the world,” and he defines these. He gives a list of them and says, “these are not of the Father but are of the world.” That is what is wrong. To reject a philosophy we must do so in certain specific actions.

These constitute three things which the apostle now defines, three categories:

There is first, he says, the lust of the flesh. And we have already seen many times, in the Scriptures this word, flesh, is usually something other than the body. It is more than that. It is the sinful nature, the sinful tendencies of humanity, the fallen condition of man, which is present in the body. It is in this sense that the apostle uses it here.

1. What is this lust of the flesh? There are certain things which our body desires that are perfectly proper, God-given. God has made us, as men, to have certain urges and hungers, and to satisfy these is not wrong. But the flesh, that sinful propensity within us, that fallen part of our nature, always seeks to add something, to go beyond the satisfying of God-given desires.

For instance, God has so made our bodies that they hunger for food, in order to maintain life. This is as it should be. But the flesh goes beyond and craves special foods, delicacies. It urges to gluttony, more than we need. It demands the best, the softest, the most flavorful. This is what John is speaking of. God has made us to have need of shelter, as human beings. But the flesh demands that it be luxurious shelter. There is a constant craving after ease and luxury. This is the lust of the flesh. God gives us the wonderful function of sex, which produces the most enjoyable sensation the body can experience. But the flesh wants to indulge this in any direction at any given time. It urges to license. This is the lust of the flesh.

2. There is a second division John sets before us, the lust of the eyes. What is this? The eye symbolizes that which pleases the mind or inner life. The lust of the eyes, like that of the flesh goes beyond simple needs. Our minds, for instance, were made by God to search and inquire, to take the great facts which revelation or nature set before us and to explore them, analyze them and systematize them. But there are certain limits to these. There are limits within nature, and there are limits within revelation. There are certain areas of knowledge of which God has said, we, as fallen men, are not to enter into because they are dangerous, exceedingly dangerous. But the flesh takes this basic permission of God and pushes it beyond God's will to extremes we are forbidden to follow. We demand to know everything. We will not accept facts unless we can understand everything about them. We seek to probe into the world of the occult, and the world of the future. We even give ourselves to superstition and the dark powers in order to explore these areas. This is the flesh, the lust of the eyes.

God has given us the gift of acquisitiveness, i.e., the desire to own things, to possess things as our own. But the lust of the eyes pushes that into greed that is never satisfied. We want more, more, more! This results in the common phenomenon of "keeping up with the Joneses," the desire to have things we do not need, bought with money we do not have, in order to impress people we do not like! God has given us a love of beauty, but the lust of the eyes perverts this into vulgarisms, the love of the erotic, pornography and idolatry, that covetousness of another's body which the Scripture labels outright idolatry.

3. There is still a third division which is the pride of life. What is this? Basically, this is the desire to awaken envy or adulation in other people. The first two divisions had to do with satisfying ourselves, not as God intended us to be satisfied, but beyond that. But they were directed toward us, and only incidentally involved others. The pride of life, however, cannot exist except as it relates to others. It seeks to create a sense of envy, rivalry, and burning jealousy in the hearts of others and gives us pleasure in doing this to them. It is the desire to outshine or to out rank someone else.

Perhaps the chief symbol of it today is the automobile, with its shiny exterior, its luxurious cushions, its beautifully designed interior, and its tremendously powerful engine, these instant horses that can be released with a touch of the toe to send us flying down a highway. What a thrill it gives us! You only have to study the habits of a human with an automobile to see how it is far more than simply a means of transportation. It is a symbol, a symbol of pride. Why do we trade our cars in every two years? Well, of course, we have very carefully designed rationalizations that can show, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that it is much cheaper to do it this way. But actually do we not do it because we want to be admired? We do not want to fall behind in the race. We want to have that which is new and excites admiration in others, even envy and jealousy. Now that is what John calls the pride of life. The automobile is not the only expression of this, but it is certainly one.

Now notice again the warning. What does John say about this? Notice he does not say, touch not, taste not, handle not. Writing to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul says, such an attitude is legalism, and it is this which has made this a verse so abused in the past. John does not say, “do not have anything to do with any of this.” But what he does say, what he wants to bear home to our hearts in living, flaming language is this one phrase, do not love these things, do not set your hearts on them, do not think of them as important. Do not give yourselves to amassing things, do not love luxury and ease, and do not strive to outshine others. God help you, keep from that at all costs. Oh, the subtlety with which this whole philosophy makes its appeal to us! When the love of these things, the importance of them, occupies our major interest; when we find them using up most of our money; when we find them looming large in our thoughts so that we are constantly dreaming of that new “something” we hope to get, then we are in danger, terrible danger. This is what the apostle wants to make clear.

This condition is often revealed in the way we make our choices. I read recently of a pastor who said that a man from his congregation actually came to him and said, “Pastor, I know you’ve been wondering why I haven’t been at the Sunday evening meeting lately. My favorite television program has been changed and it now appears at the same time as the Sunday evening meeting, and I had to choose between the two.” He told this so openly, evidently feeling that the pastor would fully approve of it, that it was a tremendous revelation of how subtly the love of the world had taken over his life. You can see this in your emotional reaction when you have lost something, or been disappointed in a business venture. Are you depressed, discouraged, defeated? What a contrast with that word in Hebrews where the writer reminds those Christians, “You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property,” {Heb 10:34b RSV}. That does not sound like many Christians today, does it?

Well, what is wrong with all this? Why must we not love the world and its things? John gives two very searching and important reasons:

1. First, because love for the world and love for God are mutually exclusive. You cannot do both, it is one or the other. Man is so made that he is designed to love, and therefore serve, but one master. Remember how Jesus put it? “No man can serve two masters,” {Matt 6:24 KJV}. He is not stating a moral choice there. He is not saying, no man should serve two masters. It is an impossibility! It cannot be done. We only delude ourselves if we think we are doing it. No, we are made to be mastered by a greater power than ourselves. This is the underlying, elementary function of humanity. But that master is either the world, as the channel and activity of the evil one, or it is God. It is God or mammon. Therefore John says, “if any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him.” You cannot do both.

If we give ourselves to loving the world, we are utilizing all the potential of our humanity to a false and grievous end. There are two powerful forces constantly making their appeal to us. Both of them offer to fulfill us, to satisfy us, to make life rich for us, but one is a lie and one is the truth. You must decide which is the lie and which is the truth for you cannot do both. This is where we fail so often. Many of us say, there must be a way of having the best of both worlds. But the entire testimony of Scripture and experience is, it is impossible. That is why the Apostle Paul writes that the mark of the last days is that men would be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. These are two absolutely antagonistic ideas.

This love of the world can get into the heart even of a dedicated Christian, and let us not forget it. Godly companionship is not enough to defend against it. Even the companionship of the Apostle Paul was not enough, for the Scriptures record that Paul himself had to write in sorrow these revealing words, “Demas has deserted me, having loved this present world,” {cf, 2 Tim 4:10}. That is how subtle, how deceitful this thing can be.

2. Now there is another reason we must not love this world. Not only does it exclude the love of God completely, but it is an utterly foolish choice, because the world, John says, is

passing away, it is only a temporary thing, but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Martin Luther wrote, "I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all. But the things I have placed in God's hands I still possess."

How true that is! We all know the glory of this world is rapidly turning to dust. The power of it soon passes from our nerveless fingers into the hands of another. Nothing lasts very long, everything is changing. "Change and decay, in all around I see." That is the characteristic of the world.

Shall we give ourselves to that temporary, fleeting, ephemeral thing? Must the best issues of our life be built on that kind of a shaky foundation? No, John says, it is he who does the will of God who abides forever. One of these days the world and all that we see in it and all that history records of it, will have been forgotten, will have passed into the silent dust of the centuries. But according to the Scripture, one day the Lord shall stand with his own and view a universe where all things have been brought together and reconciled in Christ, made one in Jesus Christ. What a thrilling thing it will be to stand there and see that come to pass and say, "Thank God, I had a part in that, in the reconciling of all things in Christ."

Our Lord divided the issues of life into two words. He says there are two things, and only two things, you can do with your life. "He that is with me gathers, but he that is against me scatters," {cf, Matt 12:30}.

Now which are you doing?

Are you gathering, or scattering?

Are you uniting and reconciling, or are you dividing and breaking up and severing?

All the issues of life funnel down into those two things. This is also where John puts it. If you are living for the world, loving its glory, seeking its fame, counting important the things it can give, clinging to these desperately, letting your emotions get wrapped up in them, you are scattering, you are breaking up, you are dividing. But if you are walking with Christ, if the things that he loves are most important to you, if a cup of cold water given in his name is of far more value than another dollar in the bank, if time is spent in comforting or encouraging some lonely person is to you a far greater treasure than a killing in the stock market, then you are building, you are gathering, you are building that which will endure, which will last forever, you are laying up treasures in heaven.

Remember the word of that superior young missionary, Jim Elliot, who died at the hands of the Auca Indians? "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep (i.e., his life), to gain that which he cannot lose."

That is where John rests his case.

Prayer:

Our Father, open our eyes to our own selves. Make us to hear the probing question from the Holy Spirit at this moment, "Which are you doing: gathering, or scattering? Building upon eternity, or living for time?" We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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