

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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