

Getting Real About Sin | Reading: 1 John 1:5-2:2

Proverbs 9:10 says; **“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, & knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”** The starting point of all true wisdom & knowledge is a right view of the one true God. Without knowledge of the Holy One we are in the dark about everything. Without true knowledge of the true God we cannot see anything properly. This means we cannot even know ourselves properly apart from knowledge of God. This is why Tim Keller writes; *“You don’t know yourself unless you know yourself in relationship to God.”* This is why John Calvin opens the first book of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion, The Knowledge of God the Creator*, with a chapter entitled *The Knowledge of God & That of Ourselves Are Connected*. He then goes on in that chapter to explain how they are interrelated. He writes; *“it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face.”* Then as he begins to conclude by talking about man before God’s majesty he writes; *“we must infer that man is never sufficiently touched & affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God’s majesty.”*

Throughout the Bible an encounter with the blazingly bright majesty of God always included an awakening to reality for the one encountering the glory of God. Whether it be Job in the dust & ashes, or Isaiah crying **“Woe to me... I am ruined”** while even the holy angels covered their faces & feet, or Ezekiel falling facedown, or John who wrote this letter falling at his feet as though dead. Job didn’t stay in the dust & ashes, Isaiah’s **“woe to me... I am ruined”** became **“Here I am. Send Me!”** Ezekiel stood up again at God’s command as did John. But for each of them there was an awakening to a greater reality & the fear of the Lord proved to be the beginning of wisdom. All true wisdom & knowledge comes from seeing ourselves in light of who God is! John writes in verse 5; **“This is the message we have heard from him & declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”**

There are three things I believe these verses lead us to consider: 1. The reality of God (v5). 2. The reality of sin (v6-2:2). 3. The reality of the Cross (v7, 2:1-2).

1. The Reality of God (v5)

John says **“This is the message we have heard and declare to you”** & this message opens with the words; **“God is light, in him there is no darkness at all.”** Then the message goes on to address the reality of sin before pointing us to our advocate & atonement – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. This is our message. The Gospel; It starts with God, it deals with sin & it ends with the good news about Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. That is the message the apostles heard & declared & this is the message we need to hear & declare today. The verb that John uses for **“heard”** means a message still ringing in our ears! There is an abiding & ever relevant quality to the message of the gospel. It never gets old. There is also an abiding &

ever relevant mandate to declare it to the world (2:2)! It should be ever ringing in the ears of God's children & ever heralded from the church to the whole world.

This message starts with God for the very reason I already mentioned. People do not know who they really are apart from in relation to God. Specifically John writes that **"God is light."** The image of light appears often in the Bible in reference to God. Sometimes it points to God's holiness, moral purity & goodness. Other times the focus is on truth & revelation. In light of what John address in this letter I believe he has both of these ideas in mind.

John's also uses the metaphors of light & darkness in his Gospel. In John 1:4-5 he writes; **"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."** In John 3:19-21 he writes; **"This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, & will not come to the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God."** For God is light & in him is no darkness at all, nothing is hidden in his light. In John 8:12 Jesus says **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."**

Note that in John 1:4 & John 8:12 the ideas of light & life are linked together... Remember that John here has been talking about the **"Word of life"** (1:1) & **"the eternal life"** (1:2) in reference to Jesus. God is in his very nature & being the source of life & because he is the source of life he is also the source of truth & morality. Without God there is no life, truth or morality. All reality flows from God. Without him there is no **"light of life"**! Everything exists because of him. As Paul quoted in Acts 17:28; **"For in him we live & move & have our being."** Now, we know that because of sin this world has been darkened to the reality of God – separated from him relationally.

However here is the amazing thing: God did not leave this world in the dark! In the Incarnation God in the form of the fully human yet fully divine Jesus stepped into this darkened world & declared; **"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."** What a claim! John 1 says; **"Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind"** (1:3-4). In Jesus **"the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world... (1:9). The Word became flesh & made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one & only Son... (1:14) No one has ever seen God, but the one & only Son, who is himself God & is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known"** (1:18).

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:6; **“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.”**

Now here is the significance of this. God is light; in him there is no darkness AT All & God has revealed himself most clearly by sending his Son into the world to live, die & rise again. Hebrews 1:3 says; **“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory & the exact representation of his being...”** That means that all we ever need to know is in Christ alone. God is not hiding anything from us & nothing in us is hidden before the brightness of who he is. Therefore you don’t need the extra knowledge of the Gnostic-like false prophets.

2. The Reality of Sin (v6-10)

I was at a Christian Ministers ordination service in England a few years ago. It became apparent during the address that the preacher wanted to talk about sin without talking about sin. He wanted to tell people the good news but he clearly didn’t want to say the S word in case he offended family & friends of the ordinates I guess. So he talked about mistakes & misdemeanours, slip-ups & blunders. He stumbled from word to word, phrase to phrase avoiding the S word at all costs. So much so that the person beside me leaned over to me & said *“why doesn’t he just say sin”* which is exactly what I was thinking.

John has no fear of using the S word. In fact he uses it nine times between 1:7 & 2:1, & 26 times throughout the letter. He also deals with it a lot more than he mentions the actual word as we’ll see in our walk through. Sin of course means to miss the mark. It was originally an archer’s term. In the Bible it is used in reference to missing or falling short of the standard of God. You could also say there are two types of sinners, rebellious sinners & religious sinners. Rebellious sinners look at God’s commands & think right I’m going to do the opposite of everything he says. I want to be my own God. Religious sinners aim at God’s target sure enough but keep falling short & then comfort themselves that at least they’re not as bad as those rebels. At least I’m trying to hit the target & that must count for something. But according to God’s Word they are no better off because you either hit the target or you don’t. You’re either a sinner or you’re not. John here is dealing with three false claims regarding sin. Each starts with the words **“if we claim...”**

The first false claim was basically that you can know God & still live in sin. To which John replies **“If we claim to have fellowship with him & yet walk in the darkness, we lie & do not live out the truth.”** In other words if that is us we are walking in falsehood & that means we are not really in fellowship with God at all. You cannot just deliberately & unashamedly live in sin & be in fellowship with God at the same time. Aga in this is directly related to the heresy that had influenced people in the churches of Asia Minor that taught spirit was good & matter was evil. One consequence of this was that people could be spiritually connected & illumined but still go mad sinning because the body isn’t important & will die anyway. John says not in Authentic Christianity you can’t. He says if that us; **“we lie & do not practice the truth.”**

Then note how he follows this in verse 7 **“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, purifies us from all sin.”** Just when you think, *“O dear, maybe I’m not a real Christian then”* he quickly clarifies that the Authentic Christian is not sinless. The Authentic Christian depends on & needs the blood of Jesus to purify him. Without the shed blood of Jesus there is no Authentic Christian’s or Christianity. Note also that in verse 6 he talks about fellowship with God yet in verse 7 he talks about fellowship with one another. I believe he’s underlining again that to walk in the light is to receive the apostle’s testimony. It’s to fellowship with those who believe & speak the truth about Jesus. John is writing this to rattle those with false assurance while at the same time assuring Authentic Christians. This is why he keeps swinging back & forward in these verses.

The second claim being made was basically this: we are not inherently sinful. In verse 8 he writes; **“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves & the truth is not in us.”** So one outworking of the false teaching was to sin like mad... but others went to the other extreme & denied sin altogether. They thought as people we are inherently good. We might be imprisoned in this fleshy body but we are inherently good in our nature. Again John says *“no, if you think so you are self-deceived & the truth is not in you.”* In other words you are not walking in the light. So, on the one hand if we claim to know God & yet walk in darkness there is something wrong, but equally if we claim to be without sin, we are deceived & the truth is not in us. If that’s the case what do we need Jesus then? Part of being in the light is realising you are a sinner. Isn’t that what Isaiah realised...

So on the one hand an Authentic Christian will not walk in darkness; in other words they will not live as if sin is okay, but on the other hand the Authentic Christian does not deny they are sinful. The Authentic Christian neither lives in sin nor denies their sinfulness. So what does the Christians relationship with sin look like then? John answers our question like this in verse 9; **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”** The Authentic Christian then does not deny their sin but confesses it, owns up to it, names their sins as sin. They don’t live life as if it’s okay, they admit when they get in wrong & turn to Christ in repentance & faith. And of course God is faithful & just to forgive our sins because of the cross of Jesus (Romans 3:22-26). I remember hearing one preacher emphasise that to have a new relationship with God means to have a new relationship with sin - meaning that what you once loved you now hate & what you once hated you now love.

The third claim John is addressing was basically this: We don’t sin anymore. Verse 10 says; **“If we claim we have not sinned, we made him out to be a liar & his word is not in us.”** Again John is very black & white. It seems some may have thought they had reached the place of spiritual perfection & didn’t sin anymore... John says to claim so is to make God out to be a liar & his word is not in us. In other words to think we are sinless is to have a heart void of the gospel. The truth is we will always battle sin in this life & therefore we will always turn to Christ as John keeps doing in these verses. Part of walk in the light is confessing sins &

trusting in Jesus. The problem occurs when we justify sin or think it's okay & therefore don't admit it is sin & simply live as if it doesn't matter. If it didn't matter Jesus would never have been nailed to the cross for sin. Walking in darkness is not the same as battling sin, walking in darkness is when we deny sin, justify sin & refuse to confess sin as sin. Fighting sin implies we've admitted our problem & the only place to fight sin is in the light of God & his Gospel. You will never win against sin in the dark...

The gospel only works when we walk in reality – when we walk in the light. The gospel is only for those who are willing to be real. The gospel does not work for fakers.

3. The Reality of the Cross (2:1-2)

John turns us to Christ again with these words; **“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”**

The very fact we need Jesus to be our advocate & atonement highlights the reality of our sin problem. John states clearly his reason for writing this is that we will not sin. However, reality makes him go on & write **“but if anyone does...”** Jesus while speaking of the 'holiest' ones of his day tells us what is in the human heart in Mark 7:20-23 & Jeremiah 17:9 also describes its condition well. This is true of my heart anyway if I'm honest. John has told us if we claim to be without sin the truth is not in us. Part of walking in the light then – walking in reality – is knowing we are inherently sinful. How can we face God with a heart that condemns us? John answers this in these verses. We have an advocate who has atoned for us. So as John 3:20 says; “If our heart condemns us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, & he knows everything.” Better to face reality than by trusting in what our advocate has done for us than by convincing ourselves all is okay. This is why John keeps pointing to what Christ has done (1:7; 9; 2:1-2).

We can face reality; we can stay in the light with confidence when all our hope is in Jesus Christ, the Righteous One! All of us can confidently face up to the reality of sin by looking to the Cross, where Jesus our living & eternal Advocate became the atoning sacrifice for our sins.