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STAYING ON THE GLIDEPATH

1 John 2:1-11

Years ago a friend from our church at the time who was a Marine fighter pilot, invited me and a couple of other guys to go down to the Marine Air Station at Miramar and try our hand at the F-18 simulator there. When he asked me I deliberated for a fraction of a nanosecond before I gave him an enthusiastic yes. So one Saturday morning we headed down to the base. He took us into this building where we were given a short briefing on what we’d be doing. Then he took me into this very large, dark room where there was a cockpit an F-18 Hornet. My friend instructed me how to climb up into the cockpit and buckle in, then explained the instruments and controls I’d be using. It was a lot to take in, and was kind of intimidating. But then I was ready to “fly.”

After I almost accidentally launched an air to air missile down the runway, I managed to get the aircraft started on a takeoff roll. When we reached the correct speed I rotated as they had instructed me and we took off. I managed to retract the landing gear without any mishaps and began flying around the San Diego area. Of course I wasn’t actually flying an airplane. There was a huge screen projected in front of me that depicted the scenes and all that the plane was doing. Following directions I flew to Qualcomm stadium and conducted a bombing mission on it. I liked to think that I bombed there just like the Chargers did so often back then. I was quite successful on that mission. But then they set me up for an approach to land the plane back at Miramar. It seemed straightforward. The runway was directly ahead of me. All I had to do was keep the speed at 140 knots, keep the nose lined up on the runway, stay on the glidepath. If you’re too high, reduce speed, if you’re too low, give it a bit of throttle. No problem. At least that’s what I thought. At first that was true, I was doing great. But as I got near the runway I was too high. Adjust speed. Uh oh, now you’re too low. Throttle. You’re drifting left, correct back to the right. Too high now and your speed is too high. As I made corrections I found I was doing too much. I began yo-yoing the airplane. The oscillations got larger and larger. I was up, I was down, I was way too high, then I was way too low. It just got worse and worse until, “We’re sorry to inform you, Mrs. Myatt, that your husband is dead because he flew his plane right into the ground.”

I tell you that story because I think there is something that can happen to us in our attempts to walk with God, that in a way resembles that up and down rollercoaster flight path I followed in that simulator. We alternate between feeling guilty, unworthy, down on ourselves and justifying, defending, even rationalizing our actions and behavior. We go up and down, on that rollercoaster, more often down than up. We need to get on the glide path and stay steady, not oscillate all over the sky. The verses we look at today, 1 John 2:1-11, provide the stable balance that we need.

BE LIKE JESUS

In chapter 1 of this book John said that if we claim we don’t sin we are deceiving ourselves, lying to others, and we are calling God a liar because he says we do sin. We know this is true. How many of us would say we never do anything wrong, we never say anything wrong, and we never even think anything wrong? There are not many, and the ones who are in that camp are probably narcissistic. Paul made it explicitly clear in Romans 3:10 when he said, “There is no one righteous, not even one.” Paul reiterated that idea in Romans 3:23 when he said, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Not many of us would think, “I don’t agree with that. I pretty much have the glory of God.”

It was a huge relief then to read in 1 John 1:9 that didn’t mean that we are all hopeless. You might think based on those verses in Romans that we are all damaged goods, destined for the dump, the great landfill that is the appropriate end for trash. However, John said if we admit our sin, and obviously, our need for the Savior, Jesus Christ, and his work in dying for us, that God will forgive our sin, our wrong, so that we have hope.

I mentioned my past experience of “flying” the F-18 simulator down at Miramar Marine Air Station. Suppose that tomorrow I decided I’d like to give that another try, so I drive down to the base and tell them I want to go fly the simulator again. How far would I get? I wouldn’t even get on the base. I wouldn’t get within miles of that simulator. The reason is I don’t have the right to do that. I haven’t earned it. I got to do it in the past because a friend had earned that right, and he essentially was able to use what he had done on my behalf. I got to fly that simulator not because of who I was and what I have done, but because of what he had done.

That is how we have fellowship with God, John says. We haven’t earned it. What we deserve is that great landfill in the sky. But our friend, Jesus Christ, has earned for us forgiveness and welcome into God’s eternal kingdom. That is how it is for anyone who wants to have fellowship with God and be in his kingdom. We get there not because of what we have or have not done, but because of our friend Jesus. He has earned that incredible privilege for us, so we come to God on that basis, and on that basis alone.

But this leads to a possible objection to the gospel of Christ. It seems too easy. If my choices and actions have no bearing on whether I am able to have this relationship with God, then I am free to live without restraint, right? Isn’t that the very thing John was refuting, people who claimed to know God but live in darkness? Doesn’t this lead to people who rely on God’s grace and claim a relationship with him while simultaneously living in ways that are in total violation of what he tells us to do or not do. In fact, Paul was accused of preaching just that. In Romans 3:8 he wrote, “Why not say, as some slanderously claim that we say, Let us do evil that good may result.” The same idea shows up in Romans 6:1, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”

Paul’s response to that question was, in Greek, *may genoito*. That is an emphatic denial. In today’s vernacular it would be in all caps, “No way, Jose!” Or, since it’s the Bible, maybe that would be “No way, Hosea.” The point is, Paul indignantly and emphatically said this was absolutely not true. John totally agreed that was not the good news of Jesus Christ. In these verses he tells us how we should live as followers of Jesus. He starts with “I write this to you so you will not sin.”

This raises the question of what sin is. The word that John used for sin literally meant “to miss.” You’re aiming at something, you shoot at it and you miss. I was watching a Padres baseball game in which the Padres were ahead late in the game by one run. They brought in a relief pitcher to start the 8th inning, and he promptly walked the first batter of the inning on 4 straight pitches. Now that’s the definition of sin. It drives me crazy when a pitcher does that because when the leadoff hitter gets on base, he will end up scoring 38% of the time. It’s like just handing the other team a good shot at scoring a run. On telecasts they have the outline of the strike zone on the screen. You can see immediately whether a pitch should be called a ball or a strike. All of those 4 pitches were outside the strike zone. They missed the target. They were literally sin because they missed the target.

Fine, but then what is the target? John tells us it is what God has commanded us. But there are quite a few commands, so this can get a bit difficult. Laurie and I like to play tennis when we are on vacation, which means we only play a few times a year. Playing that rarely means we never create the muscle memory necessary to have consistent strokes. When we play I have to remind myself of what I need to do to hit a solid shot every time I hit the ball. Move your feet into position, get your racket back early, swing from low to high, don’t bend your wrist, watch the ball, hit the ball out in front of you. That’s only 6 things, but it’s too many. Because I don’t have that process down pat, I end up doing at least one of the 6 wrong every time and thus mess up the shot. It’s hard to keep all those things in mind and do them all and that’s only 6. If we have to keep all God’s commands in mind and do them, we are going to fail. We just can’t keep track of them all.

John knew that, so he gives us a summary way to think of what the target is. At the end of verse 6 he says, “We must live as Jesus did.” The target is to be like Jesus. Paul said much the same thing in Romans 8:29. There he said that God’s purpose is that we would be conformed to the image of his Son. It is that we’d be like Jesus. That is the target, and whenever we fail to live like that, when we miss the target, we are sinning.

Great, that simplifies things. We only have to do one thing, just live like Jesus. Um, yes, that is less complicated, but it’s not easier. I’d love to be like Jesus. Here’s the problem. I’m not. This is a bit like telling a baseball player you just have one instruction for him on how to hit. Hit a home run every time you swing the bat. Do you know how many home runs I hit in my pitiful years of attempts to play baseball? That number was exactly zero. That instruction, hit a home run every time you swing, is simple and easy to remember, but impossible to do. The Padres attempt to do that very thing contributed to their downfall against that annoying team from LA. That’s also true of the “be like Jesus” instruction.

Why would John give us something to do that we are never going to be able to accomplish? Remember the historical context of these verses. John was combatting people who claimed that as long as one had the correct special spiritual knowledge, one was just fine with God and whatever one did in the physical realm was irrelevant. They had a dualistic view of nature, with the spiritual and physical realms being separate, the physical bad, the spiritual good. They claimed that the physical basically was all bad, so the difference was in the spiritual realm, which is all that matters.

For a different reason some people have tried to suggest that the gospel creates a similar idea. If you have the right idea, the right knowledge spiritually, you know that Jesus was the Son of God who died to rescue you and you trust in him, then it doesn’t matter what else you do in this world. This is John’s way of saying what you do in this world matters very much. We do not earn God’s love and forgiveness by keeping his commands, but seeking to be like Jesus will inevitably be a result of actually knowing God and having his Spirit in us. I will return to the question of why we are given this command to be like Jesus a bit later.

What does it mean to live like Jesus? Am I supposed to go around wearing a robe and sandals. healing people, preaching to them, walking on water, making storms stop in their tracks? If that’s the case I’m going to quit right now. I’ve surfed and stand up paddle boarded, and that’s as close as I’ve ever come or ever will come to walking on water. As for controlling the weather, I have tried that a time or two and have been singularly unsuccessful. I’m okay with the sandals, but would prefer to skip wearing the robe. How are we supposed to be like Jesus? He was divine, we are not. John goes on to actually refine what it means to be like Jesus. He says there is a particular way we especially should be like Jesus. It is a way that sums up Jesus’ whole approach to life. John discusses it in verses 7-10. However, his discussion is a bit confusing at first.

In verse 7 he says, “I am not writing you a new command, but an old one, which you have had since the beginning.” But then in verse 8 he says, “Yet I am writing you a new command.” Uh, which is it, John? He says it’s not new, it’s old, then he says it’s new. He sounds confused. First, let’s think about what this command is, then we will sort out the old versus new business. Verses 9-10 spell it out for us. Anyone who hates his brother or sister is still in darkness. Anyone who loves his brother and sister lives in the light. In other words, the old new command is for us to love others. Jesus said this is the defining characteristic of those who follow him. It is how people will be able to identify whether or not we really believe in him. This is true because Jesus’ whole life on earth was about loving people. He sacrificed himself for ungrateful people. At its core, love is sacrificing self for the good of another. Jesus was the pinnacle of love.

Paul wrote in Galatians 5:14, “The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself.” When it comes to how we behave in this world, all those commands in the Law of Moses pertaining to how we relate to each other, come down to that one thing. Love one another. If you do that, you will fulfill God’s commands. So John has simplified from the broad, “do not sin,” to the much more focused, “live like Jesus,” to the very specific, “live as Jesus did by loving others.”

But what about this new versus old thing? I think John is echoing something Jesus said in John 13:34. There he said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” This was not a new command. Jesus had said the greatest commandments were to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So the command to love others had been around since Moses. But Jesus made it a new command by saying, “As I have loved you.” That raised love to a whole new level. Jesus loved others by sacrificing himself for their good even when they were rejecting him. That is a level of love that goes beyond anything the world had ever seen before. This is the “love your enemy” kind of love. It is a level of love that is not natural to human beings. We love, naturally, but not to that level. It is a love whose source is divine.

REMEMBER YOUR ADVOCATE

John seems to give an impossibly high standard for how we are supposed to live. This isn’t “good news” for anyone, because we all fail to meet the standard. It sounds like Christianity boils down to a demanding system that orders us to love like Jesus did, but we can’t do it fully.

After saying in verse 1 that he wrote that we would not sin, John goes on to say, “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.” That verse tells two crucial things about Jesus. First, he is an advocate for us, and second, he is the atoning sacrifice for us. The first says he’s in our corner. He’s on our side, working on our behalf. He doesn’t have to plead with the Father on our behalf, he doesn’t have to talk the Father into forgiving. The point this description is making is that he’s for us, not against us. Even though we fail on a constant basis, he is in our corner and will never leave. Yes, our goal is a high one. It is to live like Jesus. But when we fail, as we all do, Jesus doesn’t abandon us or disown us. He is our advocate. He’s with us. Hebrews tells us he sympathizes with us and our weaknesses. He’s on our side. I mentioned last week the song *Mighty To Save* that has the words, “everyone needs compassion.” We have it. The Scriptures tell us God is the Father of all compassion. Jesus sympathizes with us. He is in our corner. He is for us, not against us. An advocate takes your side, defends you and argues for you. That is what Jesus does. That is true every moment of every day, even in our worst moments.

The second thing, the atoning sacrifice, means that he has done what is necessary for us to be forgiven and loved by God, for us to be enabled to have fellowship with the Father, which is the essential key to real life. Imagine that you are pulled over by a Highway Patrol officer and given a citation for speeding. Then you decide you want to contest it in court, not because you’re innocent, but because you’ve heard that sometimes the citing officer doesn’t show up in court and the case is dropped. But it doesn’t work. The officer is there. You admit your guilt and you are ordered to pay a fine. Then the most astounding thing happens. The officer who cited you steps up and pays the fine for you! At that point there is no fine left to pay. I’ve never heard of anything like that actually happening in a courtroom. But I’ve heard of it happening in this world. That’s pretty much what it means when John says Jesus is our atoning sacrifice. He has stepped up and paid the fine for us so that we are free before God.

Whatever we think might condemn us, might keep God from loving us, whatever we think might distance us from God, has been paid for. The stain has been removed. We are clean. There is no penalty left to pay, so we are welcome into the presence of a God who loves us. The point is, then, that the good news is way different than a moral code. It says that our standing with God is completely dependent upon our advocate and atoning sacrifice. Yes, we should not sin, we should try to be like Jesus, we should love as he loved, but when we fail, as we all do, that does not affect our fellowship with God, for that fellowship has been gained and is maintained for us by our advocate, and for no other reason.

IMPLICATIONS

We started out this morning thinking about the oscillations that can occur in our lives as we yo-yo between trusting in God’s grace and trying to obey God. The premise is that this passage can help even out those oscillations and keep us on a more steady glide path. How does it do that? If we will keep a few things in the forefront of our minds it will help us a great deal.

JESUS IS THE SOLE BASIS FOR FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

Laurie and I love all of our grandchildren dearly. Ella, Cara and Wesley are all a delight. I am amazed at the length both of us will go to in order to get a smile and a laugh from Wesley. Right now Ella gets more stories told about her because she is able to interact on a much higher level than Cara and Wesley. Recently she and Laurie were looking at Laurie’s phone when she saw a video of our Sunday morning livestream. She thought it was cool that our garage band was on the phone. Then she saw that I came on and started talking. Laurie said, “Yapaw tells people about God.” Ella added, “Yes, and me.”

Well, yes, sometimes I do tell people about her. I will tell you that she is a ridiculously gregarious little girl who wants to talk to every neighbor we encounter from age 1 to age 70 and assumes they are as interested in her as she is in them. But she also has moments that are hilariously terrible. One time Laurie was preparing a meal and after considerable effort finding that Ella didn’t seem to like anything she came up with as a menu item, they settled on a quesadilla. Laurie made it for her, but when she served it to her poor Ella just lost it. She had a massive meltdown. She began crying inconsolably. Laurie could not understand what was wrong. Ella was wailing so loudly Laurie couldn’t find out what the problem was. After quite the dramatic scene Ella managed to calm down enough to tell Laurie that the problem was that the quesadilla had cheese on it. She wanted a quesadilla without cheese. A quesadilla without cheese is not a quesadilla. It’s just a tortilla. The key here is, do you know how much that dramatic and frustrating scene affected how we feel about Ella and how much we love her? That would be exactly zero. That’s how much. Our grandchildren are beloved by us and always will be no matter what happens or what they do. Yes, they sin, but they have advocates who are in their corner in Nana and Yapaw. Our love for them is not based on their ability to “deserve” love.

Our grandchildren are not loved by us because they earn that love. They are just loved unconditionally. And that is how God loves us in Christ. It is not because we deserve it. It is because Jesus deserves it, and we trust in him and him alone. On my worst day when I think it impossible for God to put up with me because I’ve had it with myself, God loves me, but not because of anything I do. He loves me because of who Jesus is, and Jesus is in me. On my best day, when I kind of think maybe I’ve really nailed this day by heroically obeying God, God doesn’t love me because of anything I do. He loves me because of who Jesus is, because Jesus really did heroically obey the Heavenly Father, and Jesus is in me.

This is what enables us to stay on the glidepath and not oscillate all over the sky until we crash and burn. It is knowing that being loved by God is based solely, 100% with no exceptions, on Jesus and what he did on our behalf. That is a done deal. It is signed, sealed and delivered, and Jesus said nothing can change it.

THERE ARE REASONS FOR LIVING LIKE JESUS

But that brings us back to the question of why John then tells us to obey God’s commands by living like Jesus, particularly loving as Jesus loved. If that doesn’t affect how God sees us and relates to us, why do we need to concern ourselves about it? What is our motivation for obeying God?

We are used to the idea that you motivate people with the carrot and the stick. We are motivated that we earn something good by doing the right thing, the carrot, or we avoid punishment by it, the stick. But doesn’t the Gospel take away both the carrot and the stick? The past couple of years Laurie and I made a lot of trips up I-5 to San Clemente. What would you say is the average speed on that freeway from Oceanside to San Clemente? It’s at least 75. What is the speed limit? It’s 65. But everybody knows the CHP are not going to pull you over for violating that law unless you get up around 85. In other words, they take away the stick, so the law is routinely ignored. If God takes away the stick aren’t people going to ignore his commands?

I reiterate because it is so crucial, we don’t seek to live like Jesus, to obey God’s commands, because that’s how we get God to accept us or how we keep his acceptance of us. We do not earn his forgiveness and his love by deserving it. When we try to have a relationship with God on that basis, we distance ourselves from him and our efforts are doomed to fail. If we think we must obey God’s commands to gain the carrot or avoid the stick, we immediately put ourselves on the roller coaster, oscillating up and down, never at peace, never free before God, and ultimately doomed to crash and burn.

Everything in human nature and human society tells us you get love and acceptance the old fashioned way, you find a way to deserve it. The message of grace is so unnatural to us that we struggle to believe it, and even when we have accepted it, we have a nearly irresistible tendency to keep trying to bend it into that “earn it” idea. But the gospel absolutely does not bend into that shape. When we try to bend it like that, we break it. It quits bringing us the peace, the joy and the life we want.

So we trust in Jesus solely, but then what’s the motivation for seeking to live like him? After all, he ended up being treated very badly, and being like him might well be difficult and painful for us. There are several reasons. The first is wanting to live like Jesus and love like he did is an inevitable result of having the Spirit of Jesus in us. In Ezekiel 36:26 God says he will give us a new heart. Then in verse 27 he says, “I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” With the Spirit in us we will want to be like Jesus because his Spirit will move us that way.

I have in my closet a Cleveland Indians batting helmet. Toby and Anna gave it to me for my birthday a few years back. They gave it to me because they knew a story from my childhood. My first favorite baseball team was the Indians, because my grandparents lived in Cleveland, and we’d go see the Indians play there when we visited. In those days the only place you could buy team apparel was at the stadium. Jerry and I bought Indians helmets. But I made a mistake. At one point I left my helmet in the back of our car with the Bakersfield sun shining on it through the window. One side of that helmet melted in. It looked like it had been dented by a massive blow. It was ruined. I should have known better. That hot sun shining on plastic is going to have an effect. It’s inevitable. It will cause it to melt. The Spirit of Jesus, according to Ezekiel, is like that. He will cause our hearts to melt, to become soft to God’s will. He will cause is to care about being like Jesus.

When we ignore God’s commands, when we live without regard to what Jesus was like, it will bother us. We interpret that to mean that we have to meet a standard and we’re failing to measure up so maybe God doesn’t love us. But that’s not what’s happening at all. What’s really going on is we are kicking against the work of the Holy Spirit in us who is always prodding us to live like Jesus. When we don’t obey that prodding it sets up dissonance in our soul and that dissonance is uncomfortable. We can ease that discomfort by following the prodding of the Spirit and seek to love like Jesus.

A second reason for caring about loving like Jesus is the very fact that he loves us so enormously and unconditionally. The fact is, he has sacrificed for us in a way no one will ever come close to. When a person does something that incredible for you, the natural response is to want to thank them and honor them for what they’ve done. You want to sort of repay them by doing what you can to make them happy. And that is why we want to obey God. We want to honor him for the unfathomable thing he has done for us.

Laurie and I have been really helped by some people who give us their professional services basically free of charge. Their kindness humbles us and makes us thankful. Recently we experienced this and felt like we wanted to do something tangible to thank them, so we gave them a gift certificate to a local restaurant. But as we thought about it, we felt like we hadn’t done enough. So we decided to do something more to thank them. That’s not because we’re paying them. It’s not because they expect it. It’s not because they won’t help us if we don’t. It’s simply because we are so grateful to them, we want to do something. And that is a big motivation for living like Jesus. He has done something infinitely great for us, meeting our biggest needs. The natural response is to want to thank him, and we do that by living like Jesus.

The third reason for not sinning, for obeying God, is we want to live. What kind of life would you like to have? The best kind. How do you get that? Despite the many people who will tell you otherwise, you don’t get it by ignoring or disobeying God. I will present to you the most famous example in human history. The very first humans were told that God didn’t want the best for them, that he was keeping something good from them, and if they wanted the best possible life, they needed to disregard him, disobey him and do what they obviously wanted to do. They did. How did that work out for them, and for us? It created death! Thanks a lot. Our most feared enemy became our constant companion. Their choice did not produce life, it produced the opposite. And every time we make the same choice, we get the same effect. So why should we obey God? It’s because we want the best life possible!

I have had allergy and sinus issues my whole life. For much of my life I suffered miserably with it. For the past few years I have had a doctor who has helped tremendously. My problem is nasal polyps that block air flow. The doctor gives injections in those polyps to shrink them. I do that willingly because it vastly improves my life. That’s why we seek to live like Jesus even when it’s hard. It vastly improves our lives.

This is how we stay on the glidepath. We remember that God loves us because of what Jesus has done for us and nothing can ever change that. We remember that our failing does not change it and our succeeding does not make it better. But then we also remember that the path to life, to peace, joy, hope, love and meaning in life, is in being like Jesus. We choose life instead of death.