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LIKE THAT ANNOYING RINGING IN THE EAR

1 John 1:5-10

The late Herman Wouk, the best selling author, in his book, *The Will To Live On,* related a conversation he had with David Ben Gurion, the first president of modern Israel. Wouk and his wife visited the young nation of Israel. It was 1955, and Israel was constantly being attacked by terrorists from Egypt and Gaza. The Wouks were taken to Ben Gurion’s home by a military car accompanied by a jeep with a mounted machine gun. After a long discussion, as they were about to leave, Wouk says that Ben Gurion said to him, “You must return here to live. This is the only place for Jews like you. Here you will be free.” Wouk says, “’Free? Free? With enemy armies ringing you? With their leaders publicly threatening to wipe out the Zionist entity, with your roads impassable after sundown—free?’” Ben Gurion replied, “I did not say safe. I said *free*.”

What is real freedom? What will it take for you to feel and truly be free? There is something that most people don’t think of as crucial for freedom, but the truth is, without this thing no human will ever be truly free. A big theme in John’s letter that we are studying is life, full life. To have that life we must be free. We can learn about this crucial component of freedom in 1 John 1:5-10.

This passage includes an often quoted and familiar verse that is, I believe, frequently misunderstood and misapplied, and the misunderstanding leads to considerable confusion for many Christians. It actually can make their lives less free and more burdensome. Hopefully we will clear up any misunderstanding of that verse and understand the freedom we have in Christ through this passage.

GOD IS LIGHT

John begins this section making the statement that God is light. This was likely a favorite expression of the false teachers that John was combatting in this letter. They stressed the idea that God is spiritual. He is not material, thus the person of Jesus could not have been divine. After all, God is light, and light doesn’t have a physical body. When I walk into a dark room and turn on a light, I’m not physically accosted by it. It fills the room, but it is not some physical thing that I feel. No, God is light, a pure spiritual being.

John agrees that God indeed is light. That is an image often used of him in his Word. Psalm 104:2 says God “wraps himself in light as with a garment.” Psalm 4:6 says, “Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord.” Jesus said of himself in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world.”

Yes, God is light, but that is a metaphor, a symbol of God’s character, and it is not all that he is. Last week we saw in verses 1-4 John said that God manifested himself in human form in the person of Jesus the Messiah. But this imagery of light does mean something. What does this image of God as light mean? The late eminent scholar, John Stott, wrote in his commentary on John’s letters, “Intellectually, light is truth and darkness is ignorance or error. Morally, light is purity and darkness evil.” This means that God is always true, he tells the truth, but also that there is no evil in him.

John specifically drew out this last point about there being no evil in God. He said there is no darkness in him at all. This is very good news. God is light means he is absolute, pure, utterly untainted good. What does it mean when a person is good? It means that they never intentionally do anything that might harm another person. A good person always does what is good, and thus always seeks to do good to others. Because of this, we do not fear good people.

I believe it was Dennis Prager, social commentator, who used this illustration. He said imagine that you find yourself stranded in a very bad part of town. Your car has broken down. It is night, it is dark, and you know that this is not a safe place. You are feeling very concerned for your safety. Just at that moment you see a group of men come out of a house and begin walking in your direction. He asks this revealing question: would it make any difference if you knew that those men were just leaving a Bible study? It would make all the difference in the world. You would have a sense that these were good people who would mean you no harm, in fact, they would likely seek to help you.

God’s power is unlimited. Imagine coupling that infinite power with a character that contains even a little bit of evil. What would that do? It would mean we could never really trust God. We could never be safe around him, for he might suddenly choose to do something cruel, unkind or evil. Because of his immense power there would be no one and nothing to stop him. We would never feel safe because we would never know when that little evil streak suddenly might come out, and because of His power the damage it could do would be enormous.

Years ago Laurie and I were at the Encinitas Ranch shopping center. We had done our shopping so we went out to our car to leave, but when I tried the ignition, the car wouldn’t start. I figured the battery was dead. We called for road service and a half hour later a tow truck showed up. The driver hooked up cables to jump start the car but it still didn’t start. He said the problem was not our battery. Then he said, “Let me try one thing.” He got out a tire iron, went to the front of our car and slammed it a couple of times at something under the hood. This was an action I understood. I also was frustrated with the car. But I have never taken out my frustration on a car by trying to beat it up. I was shocked at what seemed to me to be unprofessional behavior. But before I could say anything the guy told me to try the ignition again. After seeing how he reacted to our car when it didn’t do what he wanted it to do, I wasn’t about to risk what he would do to me if I didn’t cooperate. I turned the key in the ignition and the car immediately started. I was dumbfounded. This guy had apparently beaten our car into submission using a tire iron. I didn’t understand what had just happened, so I asked, “How did hitting the engine with a tire iron make it start?” He said that our starter had a bad spot on it, that the starter rotates. When you get on that bad spot it won’t work. But if you hit the starter hard a couple of times and force it to rotate, sometimes you’ll get a good spot and it will work. We quickly took that car to a shop to get the starter replaced. If it had a bad spot on it, then it was a matter of time before we hit that spot again and the engine would not start, leaving us stranded again. I tell that story because if God had any bad spot on him at all, eventually we’d hit that bad spot and mayhem would result. Just as I couldn’t rely on that car with the iffy starter, we could never rely on God. In fact, we could never feel safe around him. It is great news that God is light. We can be safe because he is only good, and only does good in everything at all times.

There is another very positive aspect to this idea that God is light. It is that he is true, and he reveals the truth. One of the characteristics of light is that it shows you what is there. It reveals what exists. When you get to a certain age one of the things that happen to you is your eyes lose their focusing power. You find you can’t read some things. You have the experience of being at a nice restaurant with low lighting to create a nice atmosphere. Great for the atmosphere, bad for reading the menu. Often when this happens you might be able to read the big menu items, but not the description underneath, because it is in a smaller font. This is crucial for me because I am a discriminating eater. I have to be careful what I order, because nicer restaurants seem to love to sneak some ingredient in there that I don’t like. Why is there so much cilantro in the world? What can save me from a culinary disaster? Get out the cell phone, fire up the flashlight app, and boom! Light makes it possible to read everything on the menu. Light shows what is there, it reveals the foul ingredients that some evil chef was trying to sneak into my food.

How do we know the truth about life, about who we are? Light reveals the truth. God tells us the truth about us and about life. God’s light reveals the truth about the way the world really is. If we don’t know God, we are not going to see the world, life and ourselves as they really are. Not knowing what is real is dangerous. The only way to have a successful life is to live on the basis of reality. Back in the late 1800’s a chemist discovered that heroine is 5 times more powerful than morphine. It was considered a great treatment for children with sore throats, coughs and colds. Don’t you think it would have been a good idea for people to know the truth about heroine? They did come to realize it eventually and it was outlawed in this country.

There is a basic principle we should always remember. If we operate with a flawed understanding of reality, if we believe and act on the basis of something that is not true, then in some way we will be doing damage to our own lives. This is why it is so important that God is light, because he reveals to us what is true, what is real.

However, this aspect of God’s character also carries a potential threat for us. Light reveals what is actually there. That means that God reveals what is true about us, and that can be a problem. A few years ago we went to see a movie at the theater. Remember the old days when you actually went to theaters and watched movies in the same room as a bunch of other people? Ah, those were the days. On this occasion, as we often do, we bought popcorn. Naturally, when we bought the popcorn we got it with lots of “movie theater butter” on it. I apparently over did it with the butter. When the movie was over and we walked out into the lobby I discovered an unfortunate thing had happened. Somehow some of the popcorn butter ended up on my shirt. In the dark theater I didn’t see it, but when we walked out into the lobby the light revealed what was on my shirt. You couldn’t miss the butter stains on the front of my shirt. In the darkness it was hidden, but the light showed what was there.

Unfortunately for us the light of God reveals what is true about us. It shines a spotlight on our stains. Imagine everything you’ve ever done, said or even thought that you are not proud of, maybe even are ashamed of, being put on display in broad daylight. When I had my little popcorn butter misadventure I felt a bit self conscious walking around with those stains in view for all the world to see. Imagine the humiliation of having the really ugly stains that we don’t want anyone to know about highlighted in bright light for all the world to see. God as light presents us with a problem much greater than being humiliated. It actually is a threat to our very existence. That is why the next section of this passage is vitally important.

GOD OFFERS FORGIVENESS

To understand this section of this letter we need to have some sense of what ideas John was seeking to refute. In verses 6-10 there are two approaches to God represented. One of them is depicted with three if-then statements, the other with two if-then statements. Let’s look at the “if” parts of those statements about the first approach. In verse 6 he says, “If we claim to have fellowship with him (God) and walk in darkness.” So those who take this approach claim to be in a right relationship with God, but their lives don’t reflect that. They walk in darkness, meaning they were living in continuing disobedience to God, in whom there is no darkness at all. In verse 8 he says, “If we claim to be without sin.” Then again in verse 10 he said, “If we claim we have not sinned.” So these people claimed they did not sin, even though according to John they “walk in darkness.” How was that possible? Could they not see what was in themselves? Were they living in denial? What did this mean?

The false teaching John was confronting had elements of something that would come to be known as Gnosticism. It wasn’t fully developed at the time John wrote, but elements of it were creeping into the churches. It began with a philosophical dualistic world view which said that there is a spiritual world and a physical world that are not really connected to each other. This view claimed that the spiritual is good, while the material is bad. As I mentioned, this led to a denial of the divinity of Jesus Christ. He was physical, thus, by definition, bad. Therefore, he could not be divine, for the divine is both spiritual and good. But it also led to thinking that whatever is done in the physical world is unimportant in the spiritual realm. What makes one able to connect to God is special spiritual knowledge. If one has that knowledge then one is right with God, and whatever they might do in the physical realm is insignificant. Sin then is defined as not having the correct spiritual knowledge.

This is not exactly the same as some of the new age thinking of today, but it has some parallel ideas. For instance, it is common today to hear people today say we just need to realize the divine within ourselves. In other words, we just need to have this spiritual knowledge of our own divine nature or our unity with all things in the universe. This knowledge, we are told, is what matters. We don’t need to worry so much about “rules” pertaining to what our physical bodies do.

These people then could claim that they had no sin because they supposedly had the right knowledge. Things that a follower of Christ might call sin such as gossiping, lying, stealing, greed, sexual sin, were all things done physically, thus did not register at all with God. Imagine a scoreboard at a football game. On the TV broadcast they might talk about all kinds of statistics, like passing yards, rushing yards, turnovers, sacks, and so on. How many of those actually go on the scoreboard and determine the outcome of the game? None of them. Only points scored matter. You could imagine a defense that gave up prodigious amounts of yardage to the opponent, but they kept them from putting points on the scoreboard. Only the points mattered. The false teachers John was dealing with claimed that on God’s scoreboard only secret knowledge mattered. All the things the Bible might label as sin don’t show up on the scoreboard. Because they are in the material realm God doesn’t care about them. So they are not sin at all. Thus these people claimed that since they had the secret knowledge, they were without sin.

This has some huge implications. If you have no sin, do you need to be saved from the consequences of your sin? Of course not. You don’t need a Savior, and you certainly don’t need someone to die for your sin. So this false teaching has now denied that the man, Jesus Christ, was God in human form, and it has also denied that his death had any meaning whatsoever. It denies that we need saving. We only need to have the proper knowledge, and everything else is irrelevant.

This allowed these people to live in total rejection of God’s commands for how we should live, in effect to walk in darkness. And they could do it while claiming they had no sin whatsoever. But we should pay attention to what John says about them. In verse 6 those claiming to be in relationship with God while walking in darkness, were lying. Just as bad, verse 8 says they deceive themselves, not admitting what is obviously true. Finally, verse 10 says they say God is a liar. God must be a liar because he said that sin is very real and that it is in all of us.

The other approach to God is described by two if-then statements. Verse 7 says, “if we walk in the light, as God is in the light.” We agree that what he says is true and we seek to live in light of it. Then in verse 9 he says, “If we confess our sins.” In other words, if we admit that we are sinful, that we have many manifestations of sin and thus need a Savior. There are results of this approach to God as well.

We have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus purifies us, according to verse 7. Then verse 9 he says God will forgive us and purify us. John mentioned fellowship with one another because the false teachers did not have that. They viewed themselves as elite, as superior to other people because of their supposed knowledge. It led to them being arrogant and dismissive of others, especially those who believed in the Gospel of Grace.

Verse 9 is the often misunderstood verse I referred to earlier. It says “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins.” He’s saying having a relationship with God and being forgiven begins with admitting the truth about ourselves. It starts with saying, “Yes, I am sinful, and I need forgiveness. I need a Savior.” This verse is often interpreted to say that we have to confess our sins to be forgiven, so the way to keep ourselves right with God is whenever we sin, we must confess that, the sooner the better, and to ask God to forgive us. It is sometimes taught that this is the key to living the Christian life. We must try to have no unconfessed sin, we must confess all our sins and ask for God’s forgiveness, then we will experience God’s presence and power in our lives.

When I was young I was taught this and it led to a curious result in my life. I wanted to make sure I was confessing any sin there might be in my life so at night I would search through my thoughts and my day to see if I had committed some sin and had failed to confess it. This became a bit tedious and burdensome, and it left me with some uneasiness. What if I’ve done some sin and just haven’t been aware of it, or have forgotten about it? If I felt there was a lack of sense of God’s presence or lack of his power in my life I thought maybe it was because I hadn’t confessed some sin, so I needed to figure out what the sin was and confess it. This is not a free way to live. It is exhausting and tedious.

That understanding of the verse raises some questions. If a follower of Christ fails to confess a sin, is that sin not forgiven? Is it not covered by what Christ did? Wouldn’t that mean that we are not saved by grace alone, but by grace plus our confession? What if someone does something terrible to me and I get angry at that person, and I say some unkind things to that person. And then I suddenly die before I have had time to confess that sin. Is it not forgiven? Does that mean I will be punished by God for it?

Before he had that profound “Aha” moment that led to the Reformation, Martin Luther was a Catholic monk. He knew this verse very well, and because of it he was obsessive about confessing his sins. He spun himself into dizzy spells in the effort to minutely search everything he thought, said and did in the pursuit of even the tiniest sin. His confessions were so minute and tedious at one point he was told by the priest to whom he confessed his sins to go away and not come back until he had some more interesting sins to confess.

Colossians 2:14 says that Christ’s death canceled out the certificate of debt against us. It has been paid. That passage did not say it has been paid as long as we confess our sins. One problem with this interpretation of this verse has to do with our understanding of sin and what separates us from God. It is common to think that what distances us from God is individual sins that we commit, but it goes way deeper than that. The problem is not just that we commit sins, but that we are sinful. The problem isn’t just things we do, it’s who we are. There is something in us that pollutes even the good that we do, and it is this that keeps us from God. The individual sins that we do are a manifestation of this deeper issue. There is something wrong inside us that taints even the supposedly good things we do, making them ultimately sinful. This touches everything we are and do. So are we supposed to continually be confessing everything we do?

This verse had an historical context. It was written to refute the claims of people that they had no sin because they had the right esoteric knowledge of God that others did not have. John said for all of us a relationship with God starts with admitting that we do have sin and need grace and forgiveness. Throwing ourselves completely on God’s grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus is where life with him starts. This isn’t about confessing individual sins as we go through our day, it is about how one can ever be loved, forgiven and accepted by God. It is by admitting our need for the Savior because we are indeed sinful.

IMPLICATIONS

EVERYONE NEEDS FORGIVENESS

There is a song that is familiar to many of us these days called *Mighty To Save*. Its lyrics contain two messages that are absolutely true. It says, “everyone needs compassion” and “everyone needs forgiveness.” We all do need compassion. All of us wish that people would feel for us, would know our pain and sympathize with us. We wish that God would do that for us. We will discover that God gives us that in the passage we will look at next week. But we all also need forgiveness. That’s because all of us feel guilty. We feel guilty because we are guilty.

Guilt is a huge burden to carry, and every single human being deals with it. If we are to live the life we long to live, the life God created us for, we absolutely must have some way to rid ourselves of the weight of guilt. If we feel guilty it nags at us, it drags us down, it never goes away. At best it is always there in the background. I’ve mentioned before that due to an injury I suffered more than 40 years ago I have ringing in my left ear. It never stops, and it will never get better. Our bodies are able to adapt to a lot of things. I’ve adapted to that ringing. Most of the time I am unaware of it. But if I listen for it, I will hear it. When it’s mostly quiet I will hear it whether I listen for it or not. There are times, especially when I’m tired, that I can hear it quite distinctly and I wish it would go away. But it never does.

Guilt is like that. It’s always there. It never goes away. We kind of adapt to it so that sometimes we don’t even notice it. We learn to cope with it as best we can. But when it’s quiet, when we’re not distracting ourselves, we feel it. It frustrates us. That’s at best. At worst it grinds on us, it weighs us down. It makes us feel unworthy, ashamed. It can cause us to be angry with God and want to run from him. But at best it makes us feel hopeless and like there’s no way God can love us.

A few years ago the *Washington Times* had an article about a person named Jesse Jacobs, who created a hot line that people could call to apologize for something they felt guilty about. They could call this hotline and admit and apologize for whatever was burdening them. The line gets between 30 and 50 calls a week. Jacobs said the line offers people a chance to alleviate their guilt. One caller said, “I hope this apology will cleanse me and basically purify my soul. God knows, I need it.”

In an article in the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote 3 years ago, “Religion may be in retreat, but guilt seems as powerfully present as ever.” He went on, “People have a sense of guilt and sin, but no longer a sense that they live in a loving universe marked by divine mercy, grace and forgiveness. There is sin, but no formula for redemption.”

Guilt is a miserable thing to carry around. A couple of weeks ago Laurie told me that the scar on her face is changing. You can’t see the scar, but she can feel it when she rubs her face. She wasn’t trying to make any kind of point. But just the mention of that scar produces a pang of pain for me. The scar is there because of my mistake. It is the result of that infamous bungee cord accident. I felt horrible when that happened. She immediately forgave me, and that helped. And the wound healed without a visible scar. That helped a lot. But every memory, every mention of that incident causes me regret and remorse. It reminds me of a guilt that no matter how kind and gracious she is about it, I will never be rid of. The guilt is terrible. That’s how guilt is. I wish it had never happened, but I cannot undo it. And that’s how much of our guilt in life is.

All of us have guilt. We all know that we are not what we ought to be. We all try to hide the truth about ourselves, and many of us, maybe most, are very good at doing that so that we look good to other people. But we know the truth down inside somewhere. And that guilt is like that ringing in my ears. It’s always there. Guilt is a terrible burden. We will never be truly at peace, truly free, truly able to experience full joy, until we have had guilt relieved. But the only way to truly have peace about it is to be forgiven. We need God to forgive us completely.

Pastor Lee Strobel tells of something that happened at a particular baptism service he led. They had a large wooden cross on the stage. They had the people who were to be baptized write anything they felt guilty about on a piece of paper, then take a pin and pin that paper to the cross, symbolizing it being paid for on the cross and forgiven. One woman later wrote him a letter. She said doing that she felt the most fear she had ever felt. She wrote on the paper, “abortion.” The guilt of it was killing her, and she was afraid others would see it. But she pinned that paper on the cross. She was afraid of what would happen. But she said she felt God telling her, “I love you. It’s okay. You’ve been forgiven.” She said, “I felt so much love for me, a terrible sinner. It’s the first time I ever really felt forgiveness and unconditional love. It was unbelievable, indescribable.”

To feel truly forgiven and loved, as she said, is unbelievable and indescribable. It is a freedom and a peace that we all long for. This is what God offers us in the grace of Jesus Christ. We will never be free, truly free, until we have that forgiveness. But we get that forgiveness when we first admit our need for a Savior, when we confess to God that we are sinful and in need of his grace. When we do that we are forgiven forever. The guilt is taken away.

WE CAN WALK IN THE LIGHT

The forgiveness that God offers us is real and unlimited. In verse 7 John wrote about walking in the light. He’s talking about the light of God. That can be intimidating. We fear if God shines his light into all the corners of our lives what will show up there will cause us shame and guilt. Recently Laurie and I were in the garage and she started straightening up some things, and in the process she found some mouse droppings. I wish she wouldn’t do that. I want to live in denial. I want to live not knowing that there are mice living in our garage. If I can’t see it then it’s not real. So why does she insist on poking around and making unpleasant discoveries like that? It’s annoying. It upsets my life on the island of pleasant denial. Obviously it is a good thing she does that because we had our pest control provider come out and deal with it, and now, as far as we can tell, the problem is solved for the moment. Living in the light is kind of like that. It means having God poking around shining his light on all the mouse poop in our lives, and we don’t like it. But it’s how we start solving the problem.

It begins with admitting the problem is there, confessing it. Then it means rejoicing that God “is faithful and just and will forgive us our sin and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Does that mean he’ll make us perfect? Eventually, one day, yes, but immediately, no, it means something else. Think back to my movie butter episode. The bad news is those stains were on my shirt because I am often a klutz, a stain looking for a place to happen. I’m an equal opportunity stainer. I can and do drop all manner of food and liquids on myself causing stains. That, sadly, is as true today as ever. It’s not getting better. But here’s the good news. Laurie is the Stain Queen. She is a wizard at getting stains out of clothes. She’s had to be because of who she’s married to. She was able to remove the stains from that shirt so it is clean and pure again. That doesn’t mean my butter failure never happened. It certainly doesn’t mean I’ll never stain again. It means the stain of it has been taken away. It has been purified. And that’s what it means that God purifies us from all unrighteousness. It’s not that it never existed. It’s that the stain of it has been taken away. The guilt of it is gone.

Please note that this is true of *all* our unrighteousness. In Christ, it has all been taken away. All of it, forever. This is not because of something we have done. It is only because in his grace and love Jesus Christ has, at enormous cost to himself, taken care of the problem. We trust in that grace, in his work, and in nothing else, for we need nothing else. In him, the sin is forgiven, all the stains are gone.

We can live freely in God’s light, for it is no longer a threat to us. It only reminds us of his grace. There are many times when I get down on myself. I feel like there is a huge gap between what I should be and what I am, between what God wants me to be and what I want to be, and what I actually am. It’s easy to even think I’m a phony and that God could not possibly love me. That gap I see is real, it is revealed by light of God. But he has taken the stain of that gap away.

We will never be truly free, truly at peace, full of joy, truly comfortable in the presence of God, until the mouse poop is dealt with, until we know without doubt in our deepest soul that we are truly forgiven and loved. And that is what Jesus Christ brings us. Because of that we are free to live in his light with all of our might, joyfully, exuberantly, peacefully and enthusiastically.